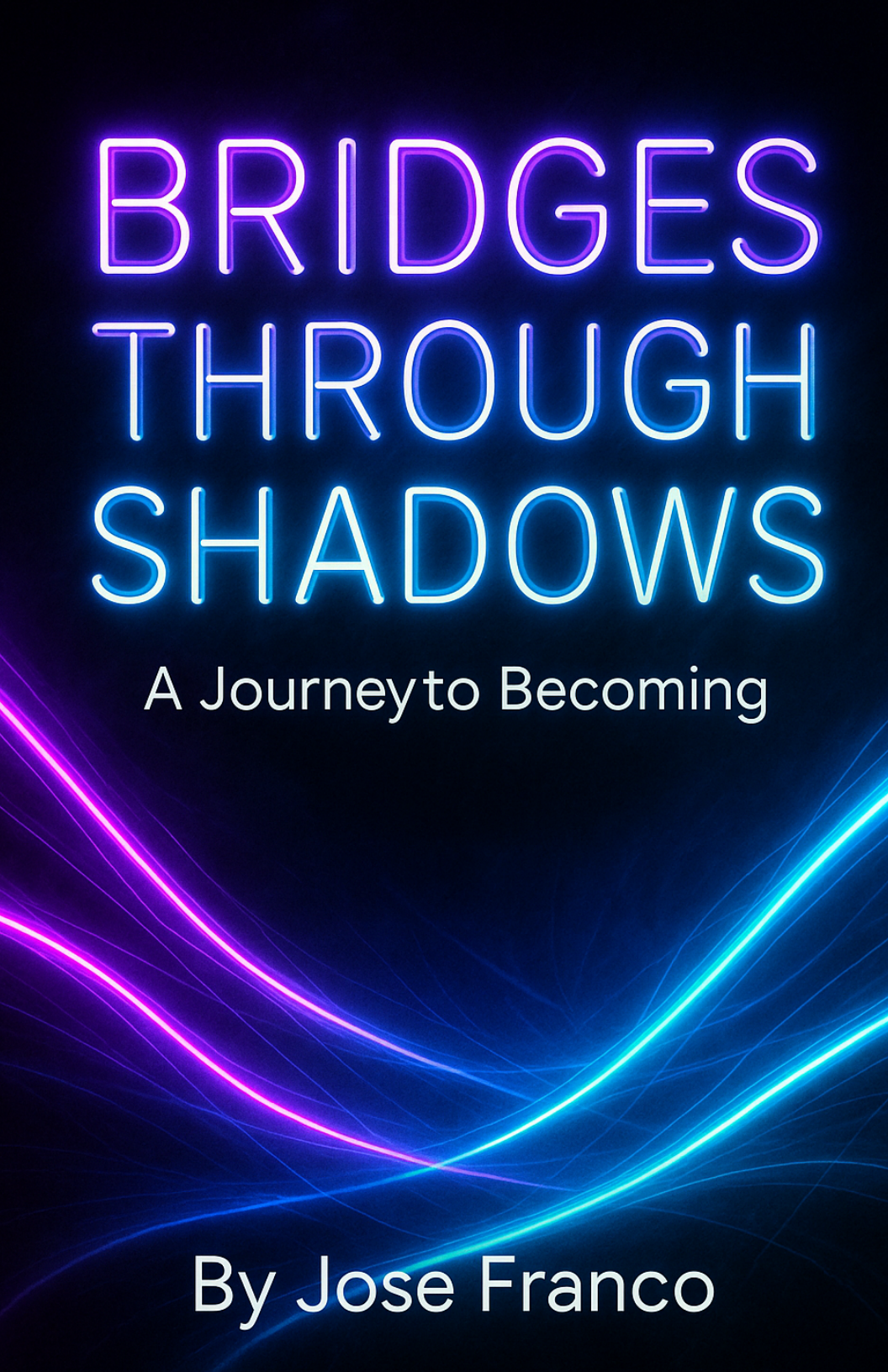
BRIDGES THROUGH SHADOWS
A Journey to Becoming
By Jose Franco

INTRODUCTION

When I think back to my journey—from the crowded stoops of Townsend Avenue in the Bronx, littered with empty heroin bags stamped "Obsession," to attending Binghamton University's Business School, and later to the quiet reflections behind the counter at Stoop Juice—I see a mosaic of struggles, lessons, and unlikely triumphs. This book is not just a chronicle of my life but a guide for anyone searching for their way out of the shadows.

To the kids sitting on those same stoops today, surrounded by noise and chaos, I want to tell you: there's more to the world than what you see. But discovering it will require something extraordinary—a willingness to ask tough questions and the courage to confront the answers, no matter how uncomfortable they may be.

I wrote this book for those who feel trapped by their circumstances, for those who believe the system is rigged against them. You're not wrong; the odds are stacked, and the shadows are long. But within those shadows lies the potential for light. That light begins with curiosity—the audacity to imagine something better.

The tools I've used—resilience, critical thinking, financial literacy, and a relentless commitment to growth—aren't exclusive to me. They're available to anyone willing to reach for them.

To respect the privacy of those involved, most names in this book have been changed, and some characters are composites of multiple individuals. These stories, though deeply personal, aim to convey universal truths that resonate with anyone seeking their way forward. However, David Durk, Piri Thomas, Boy George, Chango, Matias Reyes, Maquetumba, Randy, chapter 17 and my shoutouts in the last chapter remain exceptions. Using fictitious names for them would have undermined the authenticity of my narrative. Randy's story, unaltered and unmasked, serves as a testament to the deep connections and genuine authenticity that have shaped my journey. His memory is a constant thread woven through my life, reminding me of the enduring power of true friendship amidst the chaos.

This journey won't hand you easy answers or silver linings. Instead, it will offer you a mirror to examine your own life, a compass to navigate your labyrinth, and a reminder that every choice you make—no matter how small—matters. I'll ask you to think critically about the narratives you've been told and the ones you tell yourself. Because the most profound lesson I've learned is this: the path to becoming starts not with the world around you but with the fight within. And that fight is one you can win.

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1

When I think back to 1976, the Bronx wasn't just where I lived; it was where I learned to survive. Townsend Avenue, with its 80% abandoned buildings by 1983, felt like a fortress of forgotten dreams. Yet it was home. My mother, a seamstress with hands rough from the grind of six-day workweeks in Manhattan's garment district, held us together with a strength I couldn't fully understand as a boy. She used to say, "El que no trabaja, no come," a phrase that resonated through every meal we shared and every moment we fought to make it to the next day.

My stepfather—well, let's just say he was more landlord than father. His role was clear: pay the rent and watch me and my older brother from three to five in the afternoon. After that, we were on our own, left to navigate the maze of the block where the heroin trade thrived across the street. The corners were alive with whispers and nods, a marketplace of desperation and power I didn't fully grasp but couldn't ignore.

Life on Townsend Avenue wasn't just a backdrop—it was a living, breathing entity. I remember watching the corner boys, their faces shadowed by the flickering glow of streetlights. They moved like clockwork, passing brown paper bags and repurposed potato chip bags filled with things I didn't understand until much later. The streets

carried the weight of a thousand unspoken stories. In wholesale, the men who run the business never touch the packages. They leave that to the kids. In the retail drug trade of the Bronx, where both kids and older addicts trying to figure out if we had choices or if the streets had already decided for us.

The air always carried a mix of smells—burnt sugar from bodegas frying pasteles, car exhaust from the car dealerships on Jerome Ave, and the metallic tang of fear that hung over certain blocks after sundown. The building courtyards were our stages, and the older men—weathered faces etched with lines of disappointment—were our audience. They'd shake their heads, muttering about "kids these days" while passing around a bottle wrapped in brown paper bag. Piri Thomas's words from Down These Mean Streets echoed in my mind even years later: "The streets are alive at night, shadows keeping you company like old friends, until they're not."

My mother, sharp as ever, refused to let the Bronx crush her spirit. She came from the Dominican Republic, her Spanish accent was neutral, making it hard for other Latinos to figure out where she was from. Yet, her mind sharp with numbers, a legacy from her father, a brilliant operations manager who passed before she could even know him. She wanted better for me, for us, but better felt elusive when the world outside our door seemed to be sinking.

Despite the chaos around me, I stumbled onto something that changed me in the sixth grade. I found a history picture encyclopedia tossed out with someone's trash. Its pages were tattered, but to me, they were golden.

I devoured every entry—wars, inventions, civilizations. For the first time, I realized there was a world beyond the Bronx, a place where people built things, created ideas, and left legacies. It was the spark that made me intellectually curious, though at the time, I didn't know that term.

Still, there were moments when I could escape. Later in life, books became my lifeline. Nietzsche, Kant, Boethius—their words were portals to a reality bigger than the Bronx. In my late forties, I'd sit during downtime behind the counter of my Juice bar, instead of the sounds of sirens and shattered glass in the background of my youth, losing myself in the philosophical questions of morality, truth, and justice accompanied by the smell of ginger and wheatgrass. I didn't realize it then, but the pictures in that encyclopedia planted seeds that would later help me confront some of my darkest moments.

One humid afternoon in 1989, I stumbled into a community writing workshop led by David Durk, the same David Durk who helped shake up the heroin trade—for a time, at least. I didn't know who he was then, but I felt his presence immediately. He spoke about systems of corruption and resilience, about standing up to powers larger than oneself.

After the session, I lingered. Something about him drew me in.

"Mr. Durk," I said, my voice shaky, "how do you keep fighting when it feels like the world's already decided against you?"

He looked at me, his eyes piercing but kind. "You don't fight the world, Jose. You fight the part of yourself that wants to give up. That's the real battle."

Those words stayed with me. They became a mantra of sorts, a reminder that even when the streets felt suffocating, there was still a fight worth having—a fight within myself.

Years later, as a student at Binghamton University, I had the chance to meet Piri Thomas, the author of Down These Mean Streets. He'd come to speak to students, and his raw honesty struck me like a thunderbolt. Here was a man who had walked paths darker than mine and lived to write about it—to teach through it.

After his talk, I approached him, nervous but determined.

"Mr. Thomas," I began, "how did you find your way, coming from where you came from?"

He smiled, the lines on his face deepening. "Mijo, the streets are a teacher, but they're not the only teacher. You've got to find your truth and hold on to it, no matter how much the world tries to strip it away."

That conversation lit a spark. It was as if Piri had handed me a compass, a way to navigate not just the physical streets of the Bronx but the labyrinth of my own mind and heart.

The first time I wrote about those days, it was messy. Anger bled through the words, bitterness I hadn't yet confronted. But as I kept writing, something shifted. The act of putting pen to paper became a form of self-confrontation. It forced me to see not just the world but my place in it—my role in both the pain and the possibility.

By the time I wrote Balancing The Pendulum, decades later, I had come to understand that the real treasure I'd been searching for wasn't buried in some distant backyard. It was within me all along, waiting to be unearthed through honesty, struggle, and an unwavering commitment to growth.

Even now, as I tell this story, I'm reminded of why I began. This book isn't just for me. It's for the kid sitting on a stoop, wondering if there's more to life than the block. It's for anyone who's ever felt trapped by their circumstances but dared to dream anyway. And it's a tool—one I'll use whenever my own heart and mind start to close, whenever the fight within feels too heavy to bear.

I'm still learning, still fighting. But if there's one thing I know, it's this: the struggle is where the light comes in. And for that, I'll always be grateful.

2

The streets of the Bronx spoke their own language, one that you had to live to understand. Screams of "Maria" by the drug spot's lookout workers warned the servers working in the abandoned building at 1500 Townsend Ave of the Police. It wasn't just the slang or the way people greeted each other—it was the rhythm of survival, the unspoken codes that dictated who could walk where and when. Townsend Avenue, in the shadow of burnt-out buildings and the flicker of neon signs from the bodega on 172nd st between Townsend and Jerome, was a stage for stories that no one outside the borough would bother to write down.

I remember watching the grown men on my block running small packages up and down the avenue. Some of the workers were kids, who weren't much older than me, but their faces were harder, their eyes sharper. They worked for men who wore shiny watches and designer clothes, men who never carried the packages themselves. David Durk's words from a workshop years later echoed: "The bosses don't get their hands dirty. They leave the risks to the ones they can afford to lose." At the time, I didn't understand what he meant, but I was already watching it play out every day.

The heroin trade wasn't just an economy—it was a culture. The corner boys who weren't outwardly showing any signs of addiction, wore their status like armor, the way their sneakers stayed spotless or their chains glinted in the sun. But there was a weight to their confidence, an undertone of desperation. Piri Thomas wrote in Down These Mean Streets about the magnetic pull of the streets, how they offered both freedom and chains. Watching those boys, I understood what he meant.

But even then, I was already learning to ask questions. Why were so many families on my block caught in cycles of addiction? Why did the cops cruise through the neighborhood only to park on side streets and pretend not to see? Years later, I would find studies that confirmed what I suspected—that addiction wasn't just an individual failing but a systemic one. Research from the National Institute on Drug Abuse highlights how economic instability, lack of access to education, and systemic racism create the perfect storm for substance abuse. But as a kid, all I knew was that it didn't feel fair.

There was one boy I couldn't forget. His name was Shawn, and he had a smile that could light up the block. Shawn used to tell me about his dreams—owning a car shop on Jerome Ave, getting his mom out of the projects. But the streets had a way of crushing dreams faster than you could speak them out loud. One summer evening, I saw Shawn handing off a brown bag to a man in a Cadillac. He caught my eye and smiled, but there was a sadness behind it, a flicker of knowing that his dreams were slipping

away. Shawn didn't last long on the block. One day, he was gone, and no one talked about it.

The Whispering Streets taught me early on that silence was a form of survival. You didn't ask where someone went, why the cops were circling, or why the lights in the building next door were suddenly boarded up. But the questions stayed with me, buried beneath the surface. Years later, as I started reading Victor Frankl in college, his words about finding meaning in suffering struck a chord. "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."

If that was true, I wondered, then what were we choosing? Were we victims of the streets, or were we complicit in keeping them alive? These were questions I didn't have answers to then, but they haunted me as I navigated my way through the Bronx.

One day, while flipping through the tattered encyclopedia I'd found, I stumbled on a picture of the Roman aqueducts. It described how these ancient structures brought water to entire cities, sustaining life through ingenuity and effort. I wondered what it would take to build an aqueduct for the Bronx—not for water, but for hope. Could the streets whisper a different story if only someone could rewrite the script?

The relevance of these questions became clearer when I came across a study during my time at business school. The study, published in Science, showed how environmental factors—like access to stable housing and education—had a measurable impact on long-term economic mobility. The Bronx wasn't just unlucky; it had

been designed this way. The redlining maps from the 1930s, which marked neighborhoods like mine as "high-risk," were still casting their shadow decades later.

For a kid growing up in those shadows, the streets were both a trap and a teacher. They whispered lessons about power, resilience, and the price of looking away. But they also left scars—ones I wouldn't confront until much later. For now, I listened and watched, my questions growing louder even as the streets tried to silence them.

3

In the Bronx, stoops weren't just slabs of concrete—they were gathering places, stages, and sanctuaries. On Townsend Avenue, the stoop was where you learned who you were and where you stood. You could sit for hours, watching the world unfold: kids dodging cars in heated stickball games, mothers leaning out of windows hollering for their children, and corner boys holding court with their laughter and bravado. The stoop was both a front-row seat to the theater of the streets and a shield against its dangers.

I spent countless afternoons perched on our stoop, my feet dangling over the edge, listening to the stories of the older men who seemed to carry the weight of the neighborhood in their voices. They spoke in hushed tones about the "good old days," as if nostalgia could soften the sharp edges of their realities. One man, we called him Old Manny, used to tell us about his time in Puerto Rico, describing lush green mountains and rivers that sparkled in the sun. His words painted a world so different from the cracked sidewalks and graffiti-covered walls that surrounded us. But his stories always ended the same way—a sigh, a swig from his brown paper bag, and a muttered, "But that was a long time ago."

The stoops weren't all storytelling and camaraderie, though. They were also places where fear lingered, just out of sight. I remember one evening when the shadows seemed darker than usual. A fight broke out between two boys over something dumb, and within minutes, it escalated. One of them, a boy named Reggie, pulled out a knife. The sight of the blade gleaming under the streetlight sent a chill down my spine. The crowd scattered, leaving only Reggie and another kid, who stood frozen in place. Thankfully, an older neighbor stepped in before anyone got hurt, but the tension lingered long after the boys had been sent home.

Years later, I'd come to understand what researchers describe as the "flight-or-fight" response. Studies from the American Psychological Association have shown how growing up in environments filled with chronic stress can rewire the brain, making it more reactive to perceived threats. At the time, though, all I knew was the tightness in my chest whenever a confrontation broke out and the relief that came when it ended without bloodshed.

One of the most vivid memories I have of those stoop conversations was a story Old Manny told about the "watchers." He said they weren't cops or corner boys, but older women who sat silently on their stoops, their sharp eyes missing nothing. "They know everything," Manny said, his voice low. "Who's in debt, who's cheating, who's moving packages. If they ever look you in the eye, you'll feel it."

It sounded like one of his tall tales until I realized there was truth to it. Mrs. Rosa, who lived a few doors down, rarely spoke, but her presence was undeniable. She had a

way of turning her gaze toward you that made you want to straighten up, as if she could see straight through the masks we wore. Once, when I was about nine, I stole a piece of candy from the corner bodega. Mrs. Rosa caught my eye as I skipped past her stoop, and the guilt hit me like a punch to the gut. I returned the candy the next day, not because anyone forced me, but because I couldn't shake the weight of her silent judgment.

The stoops also taught me about the invisible lines in our minds that divided us. One block over several Italian families lived, I'd later refer to them as "White Flight Laggers". Some of their stoops seemed brighter, cleaner, as if their lives were somehow untouched by the decay that crept through the rest of the neighborhood. Others, were messy and the white families were no different than us. Even as a child, I knew their worlds weren't so different from ours. I'd see their kids playing stickball just like we did, their mothers dragging them home by the ear for staying out too late. The difference was in the way they looked at us when they passed by—a mix of curiosity, fear, and something else I couldn't quite name.

Reading Piri Thomas years later gave me a language for what I'd felt. He wrote about the subtle ways people are divided, how color and language and class become barriers even among those who share the same streets. "It's not the bricks or the mortar," he said. "It's the spaces between them."

One day, while flipping through my tattered encyclopedia, I came across a photograph of the Berlin Wall. The caption described how it split a city in two,

dividing families and friends. Looking at the picture, I thought about the unspoken walls in my own neighborhood—how going from one block to another could feel like a world apart. It made me wonder: What would it take to tear down those walls, to make the stoops a place where everyone could sit together?

Years later, I read a study published in Nature Human Behaviour that explained how exposure to diverse environments reduces implicit bias. The researchers found that meaningful interactions across different groups could reshape perceptions, fostering empathy and understanding. At the time, I didn't have the words for it, but I felt it every time I managed to cross one of those invisible lines, whether by sharing a laugh with an Italian kid over a stickball game or listening to Old Manny's stories about Puerto Rico.

The stoops taught me that every shadow had a story, every silence a meaning. They were places of joy and tension, unity and division. And though I didn't know it then, they were also teaching me to see—not just the world around me, but the world within.

The question that stayed with me was this: Could the lessons learned on those stoops ever be enough to change what lay beyond them?

4

On the stoops of Townsend Avenue, stickball (baseball's little brother) was more than just a game—it was a lifeline, a window into a world where hard work and talent could change everything. The crack of a stickball bat on a humid summer afternoon was the sound of possibility, even for a kid like me, navigating the chaos of the Bronx.

My stepfather, a former minor league player from San Pedro de Macorís, shared stories that felt larger than life. Known as the "Cradle of Shortstops," his hometown produced legends like Sammy Sosa, Alfonso Soriano, and Robinson Canó. These players were icons, but their roots mirrored mine—humble, gritty, and full of resilience.

The best day I spent with my stepfather began on a sticky July afternoon in 1978 when we took my grandmother to Shea Stadium. Baseball had always been her love language, and players like César Cedeño, dubbed "the next Willie Mays," were her heroes. That day, Cedeño, a star player with Houston, spotted her in the stands. His respect for my stepfather's mother was clear when he accepted a ride back to his Queens hotel with our family. Sitting next to him in the car, I was starstruck, barely able to speak.

Even then, I recognized the weight of the moment. This wasn't just a car ride; it was a brush with greatness, a

reminder that extraordinary stories can emerge from ordinary places.

My own baseball journey began in 1974 with an unlikely encounter. Wandering far from home, I met a tall man named Ángel Rijos, a former Dominican League player, who handed me a glove and unknowingly sparked my love for the game. From pickup games on Bronx schoolyards to competing with DeWitt Clinton High School's varsity team, baseball became my education in discipline, failure, and hope.

By my teenage years, the sport consumed me. Playing for travel teams and competing against older kids taught me to grind, to push past limitations. I learned that competitive baseball has levels—beginner, novice, collegiate, and professional. My ambition was to climb them all.

Baseball also taught me to see beyond the game. The diamond became a metaphor for life, where fairness was a myth, and resilience was your best defense. I noticed parallels between the lives of aspiring players from San Pedro and the kids on my Bronx block. Both dreamed big but often lacked the resources to realize those dreams.

As I sat on the stoop, reliving that day at Shea Stadium, I realized something profound: Baseball wasn't just a sport. It was a bridge—between cultures, generations, and possibilities. It showed me that even in the shadows of poverty and injustice, there's light, if only you're willing to chase it.

5

The first time I heard David Durk speak, I was 22 years old, sitting in a community writing workshop that I stumbled across while hanging out in Greenwich Village. "Write your way out," a heavy set woman said, her voice firm but filled with hope. I didn't know what she meant at the time, but I walked in anyway, more out of boredom than curiosity. Little did I know, this workshop would plant seeds that would take years to fully bloom.

David Durk wasn't like anyone I'd met before. A graduate of Amherst College, he was articulate, but it was his choice to enter police work and typical New Yorker mannerism that truly set him apart. "I could've done anything after Amherst," he admitted during that first workshop. "But I wanted to see how systems work from the inside. I wanted to understand why the cracks form."

He shared stories of his time in the NYPD, painting a vivid picture of corruption, apathy, and resilience. "The bosses never touch the product," he said, his tone measured. "They've built a system that feeds off kids who don't even realize they're being used." But what struck me wasn't just what he said—it was how he said it. He spoke not with judgment but with empathy, as though he understood what it meant to be trapped by forces beyond your control.

I remember watching him, trying to reconcile his privileged background with the gritty realities he described. Amherst had groomed him for boardrooms, not precincts. Yet here he was, standing in a dimly lit room, teaching me to see the world differently. His words carried a gravity that made you want to listen.

Durk's stories brought to mind the things I'd seen on my own block—kids running packages, men in shiny cars who didn't live there, and the way the police seemed to circle like vultures, showing up only after the damage was done. His words made me wonder: Were we complicit in our own oppression, or were we simply trapped in a system designed to keep us in place?

Durk's willingness to confront the system—to use his privilege not to escape it but to expose it—humanized him in a way that left an impression. He wasn't an outsider looking down; he was an outlier looking in, refusing to accept that things had to be the way they were. "You fight by finding the cracks," he said, looking around the room. "And once you see them, you refuse to look away."

It was years later, while reading a study on systemic inequality, that Durk's lessons came back to me. The study, published in The Lancet, examined how chronic stress from economic instability and discrimination affects decision-making and resilience. It found that environments filled with uncertainty and danger rewire the brain, making it harder to plan for the future or take calculated risks. The streets weren't just a setting; they were shaping us in ways we didn't even realize.

One moment from that workshop stands out. Durk asked us to write about a time we'd witnessed injustice. Most of the room stayed silent, but I thought of Shawn, the boy from my block who'd been swallowed by the streets. I wrote about his dreams of owning a car shop, about the way the streets had chewed him up and spat him out. When I read my piece aloud, Durk nodded, his face serious.

"Good," he said. "Now ask yourself this: What would Shawn's life have looked like if he'd been born in Midtown Manhattan, or two states over? Would he still have ended up here?"

The question haunted me. I knew the answer, even if I didn't want to admit it. The system wasn't broken; it was working exactly as it was designed to. And yet, Durk's insistence on hope stayed with me. He wasn't naïve—he knew the odds were stacked against us—but he also believed in the power of individuals to make change, however small.

As I left the workshop that day, I felt a flicker of something I couldn't quite name. It wasn't hope, exactly, but it was close. It was the sense that maybe, just maybe, there was a way to write my way out. And if I could find it, then maybe I could help others find theirs too.

Durk's lessons weren't just about fighting corruption or fixing the system. They were about seeing the cracks, refusing to look away, and finding the courage to step through them. Years later, when I began writing Balancing the Pendulum, his words were still with me. They reminded me that even in the darkest places, there are cracks where

light can get in—if only we're brave enough to look for them.

6

It was an ordinary afternoon when I found it—a thick, battered book lying atop a pile of trash near the corner of Mount Eden. At first, I thought it was just another discarded thing, like the rusted bikes and broken chairs that littered the block. But something about the gold-embossed lettering on the cover caught my eye. It was a history picture encyclopedia, its spine cracked but still holding the weight of centuries within its pages.

I carried it home like a prize. As I flipped through its worn pages, my world grew larger with every image and story. There were pictures of Roman aqueducts and ancient pyramids, tales of revolutions and discoveries. I had never seen anything like it. The Bronx seemed to shrink in comparison to the vastness of the world inside that book. It was the first time I felt that knowledge could be a form of escape.

That encyclopedia became my refuge. I'd sit on my bunkbed (top) with it propped open on my lap, tracing the lines of ancient maps with my finger, imagining what it must have been like to stand on the steps of the Parthenon or sail with Magellan. The pages were yellowed and the edges torn, but to me, it was a portal to something greater than myself.

What struck me most were the stories of ingenuity—how people had overcome impossible odds to build, explore, and create. The aqueducts fascinated me in particular. They seemed almost magical, carrying water across vast distances to sustain entire cities. I couldn't help but wonder: What would it take to build something like that here? Could there ever be an aqueduct for hope in a place like the Bronx?

I didn't have the words for it then, but years later, I'd learn about the concept of self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to achieve goals and overcome challenges. Research published in Psychological Review highlighted how self-efficacy influences motivation and resilience. That encyclopedia was my first taste of it. It showed me that the world was bigger than the block, and that there were possibilities beyond what I could see.

But the Bronx had a way of reminding you where you were. One evening, as I sat on the stoop flipping through the pages, a group of older kids walked by. One of them, a tall boy with a swagger that demanded attention, snatched the book from my hands. "What's this?" he asked, holding it up like it was a joke.

"It's mine," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

He smirked, flipping through the pages before tossing it back to me. "Don't waste your time, kid. Ain't nothing in there gonna help you here."

I didn't respond, but his words stayed with me. Part of me wondered if he was right. The streets didn't care about aqueducts or revolutions. But another part of me refused to

believe that knowledge was useless. If anything, his dismissal made me hold onto that book even tighter.

Years later, I'd come across a study in Developmental Psychology that examined how exposure to new ideas and environments fosters resilience in disadvantaged youth. It found that even a single book, teacher, or experience could ignite a spark that changes the trajectory of a life. That encyclopedia was my spark. It didn't change my circumstances overnight, but it planted a seed of curiosity and possibility that would grow over time.

It was also the beginning of a question that would follow me for years: What does it take to believe in something better when the world around you tells you not to? The answer, I'd later learn, isn't simple. It's a mix of defiance, imagination, and sheer stubbornness. And sometimes, it's as small as finding a book in the garbage and deciding it's worth keeping.

I don't know what became of that encyclopedia, but the lessons I learned stayed with me through the years. Those lessons were with me when I started college, when I first read Viktor Frankl and began to see the parallels between his search for meaning and my own. They were with me when I started questioning the systems around me, wondering how much of my life had been shaped by forces I couldn't control.

Even now, I can still picture the cover of the encyclopedia, the way the gold letters glinted in the sunlight that day on the corner of Townsend Avenue. It was a reminder that even in the most unlikely places, there are

treasures waiting to be found. You just have to be willing to see them.

7

The first time I met Piri Thomas, I didn't know what to expect. I had read Down These Mean Streets in a borrowed paperback missing it's cover, its pages dog-eared by hands that had lived through the same kind of struggles Piri wrote about. His words had resonated with me, not just because of the raw honesty, but because he managed to articulate a world I was still trying to make sense of. When I heard he was coming to speak at Binghamton University, where I was a student, I knew I couldn't miss it.

The Student conference room was packed that evening. There was an electricity in the air, the kind that comes when someone with real lived experience steps up to the mic. Piri didn't disappoint. He was a small man, but he carried himself with the confidence of someone who had been through fire and come out the other side. When he spoke, his voice was both rough and soothing, like sandpaper on wood.

He began with a story about Harlem, about standing on a rooftop as a boy and shouting at the world, demanding to be seen. "Hey, World! Here I am! You see me?" he had yelled into the night, his voice cracking with anger and hope. That night, he told us, he realized he couldn't wait for the world to notice him—he had to claim his place in it.

I sat riveted, my notebook open but forgotten. Piri's words cut through the noise in my mind, forcing me to confront questions I had been avoiding. Was I waiting for the world to notice me? Was I letting the streets define who I was, or was I willing to carve out my own path?

Piri's stories weren't just tales of survival; they were lessons. He spoke about the pain of rejection, the sting of racism, and the struggle to find dignity in a world that seemed intent on stripping it away. "But you don't fight hate with hate," he said, his eyes scanning the crowd. "You fight it by holding onto your humanity. By refusing to let the world make you less than you are."

After the talk, I waited in line to speak with him. I wasn't sure what I was going to say, but I knew I couldn't leave without talking to him. When it was my turn, I stammered out a question: "Mr. Thomas, how do you keep going when the world keeps knocking you down?"

He smiled, a slow, knowing smile. "Mijo, the world will knock you down a thousand times. The trick is not to let it knock you out. You get up, every time. And you keep your heart open. That's the only way."

That conversation stayed with me. It wasn't just his words, but the way he said them—like he was passing down a secret, one he had earned the hard way. I thought about his rooftop moment, about shouting at the world and daring it to see him. Was I brave enough to do the same?

Years later, I'd read a study on resilience in marginalized communities published in Social Science & Medicine. The researchers found that one of the most critical factors in resilience was a sense of purpose—a belief that your life has

meaning, even in the face of adversity. Piri's compass was his humanity, his refusal to let the world make him bitter. He had found his purpose in telling his story, in using his pain to help others navigate their own.

That night, after the large room had emptied, I sat alone with my thoughts. Piri's words had lit a fire in me, but they also scared me. He made it sound so simple: Keep your heart open. But I knew how dangerous that could be. The streets didn't reward vulnerability; they punished it. How could I hold onto my humanity in a world that seemed determined to take it away?

The answer didn't come to me that night, or even in the weeks that followed. But slowly, I began to see the wisdom in Piri's approach. Keeping your heart open didn't mean being naïve. It meant choosing to see the humanity in others, even when they couldn't see it in you. It meant refusing to let the world make you cynical.

One afternoon during Spring break back in the Bronx, I found myself on the stoop of my old building, watching the kids on the block. One of them, a skinny boy with a mop of curly hair, was being taunted by a group of older boys. They had taken his sneakers and were tossing them back and forth, laughing as he tried to grab them.

I thought of Piri's stories, of the times he had been humiliated and how he had refused to let it break him. I walked over and told the older boys to give the sneakers back. They looked at me like I was crazy, but something in my voice must have convinced them. They tossed the sneakers on the ground and walked off, muttering under their breath.

The boy looked up at me, his eyes wide with surprise. "Thanks," he said quietly.

"Keep your head up," I told him. "And don't let them see you sweat."

It wasn't much, but it felt like a step. I thought about what Piri had said about keeping your humanity, and for the first time, I understood what he meant. It wasn't about grand gestures or dramatic moments. It was about the small choices you made every day—to be kind, to stand up, to keep your heart open.

Piri Thomas taught me that the compass you carry inside you is more powerful than anything the world can throw at you. It doesn't make the journey easier, but it gives you a direction, a way to keep moving forward. And sometimes, that's enough.

8

By the time I found myself sitting in the fluorescent-lit library of Binghamton University, leafing through the first pages of Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, I had already spent years running—from the streets, from the expectations placed on me, and most of all, from myself. Philosophy hadn't yet entered my life as a guide. Until that moment, it had been a distant concept, something reserved for ivory towers and intellectuals whose lives were far removed from the Bronx. But when I read Frankl's words, something shifted: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

I didn't immediately understand the full weight of those words, but they stuck with me like a whisper I couldn't ignore. They forced me to confront something I had been avoiding—the idea that my circumstances, no matter how unfair, didn't have to define me.

Back then, my world was one of contrasts. On the one hand, there was the Bronx, with its unrelenting challenges and codes of survival. On the other, there was the university, a place that promised a path out but also reminded me, at every turn, that I didn't quite belong. As a business major, the majority of my classmates came from suburbs and private schools. Their lives seemed easy in

ways I could barely fathom. They spoke with an effortless confidence about futures they seemed to take for granted. Meanwhile, I was still navigating the unspoken rules of a world they'd never stepped into.

But the library became my sanctuary, and philosophy became my bridge. I started with Frankl, then moved on to other thinkers: Nietzsche, who warned about staring too long into the abyss; later, behind the counter at Stoop Juice, Simone de Beauvoir, who spoke of freedom as a source of meaning; and Boethius, whose Consolation of Philosophy seemed written for moments like mine, where the world felt like a series of locked doors.

One passage from Nietzsche stood out to me: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." It resonated in a way I couldn't yet articulate. What was my "why"? Was it simply to escape the Bronx? Or was there something deeper, something I hadn't yet uncovered?

I didn't have answers, but I began to see the questions themselves as valuable. In philosophy, I found a space where I could wrestle with my doubts without judgment. It was a space that allowed me to be both vulnerable and defiant, to admit my fears while refusing to let them define me.

Back in the Boogie Down, philosophy wasn't something people talked about. The streets didn't leave much room for existential debates. But even there, I began to see echoes of what I was learning. When Nietzsche wrote about the "will to power," I thought of the corner boys, their swagger masking their struggles. When de Beauvoir spoke of the tension between freedom and constraint, I

thought of my mother, balancing the weight of her sacrifices with her dreams for me.

One moment stands out from that time. I was sitting in a philosophy class, my notebook filled with half-formed ideas and scribbled questions. The professor was lecturing about Plato's Allegory of the Cave, about prisoners who mistake shadows for reality because they've never seen the world outside. As he spoke, I felt a knot tighten in my chest. The Bronx was my cave. The shadows were the narratives I had grown up with—the belief that the streets were all there was, that survival was enough, that dreaming beyond the block was a fool's errand.

But what if those shadows weren't the whole picture? What if there was a way to step outside, to see the world as it truly was? The thought both thrilled and terrified me. It was easier, after all, to stay in the cave, to stick with what you knew. But philosophy was showing me that comfort wasn't the same as freedom.

I began to write more during that time, filling journals with questions and reflections. One entry from that period reads: "What does it mean to live a good life? Is it enough to escape, or is there something more? And if there is, how do I find it?" These weren't questions I expected to answer anytime soon, but they became my compass, guiding me through the uncertainties of my journey.

One night, as I walked back to my dorm, I thought about my mother. She had always been a pragmatist, focused on the tangible realities of survival. Yet, in her own way, she was a philosopher too. Her mantra, "El que no trabaja, no come," was a lesson in responsibility, in the

relationship between effort and reward. She didn't need Plato to tell her about the value of work or Nietzsche to teach her about resilience. She lived those lessons every day.

I wondered what she would think of my newfound obsession with philosophy. Would she see it as a distraction, a luxury we couldn't afford? Or would she understand that, for me, it was a lifeline—a way to make sense of a world that often felt senseless?

Years later, I would come across a study in Psychological Science that explored the relationship between existential questioning and resilience. The researchers found that people who engage with life's big questions are often better equipped to handle adversity. The act of questioning, they argued, creates a sense of agency—a belief that you have some control, even in the face of uncertainty. Looking back, I realize that's what philosophy gave me: a sense of agency in a world that often felt beyond my control.

But philosophy didn't just teach me to think; it taught me to act. It pushed me to challenge the narratives I had grown up with, to question the limitations I had accepted as fact. It reminded me that the shadows on the wall weren't the whole story, and that stepping outside the cave was worth the risk, even if the light was blinding at first.

Behind Stoop Juice's counter, where I often sat reading, became a metaphor for that journey. It framed the world outside, a world that seemed both distant and within reach. Through that window, I began to see possibilities I hadn't dared to imagine. And though I didn't know it at the time,

those moments I spent with Nietzsche, Frankl in college and de Beauvoir and scores of other philosophers in Stoop Juice were laying the foundation for a journey that would take me far beyond the Bronx—not just physically, but emotionally and intellectually.

The question that stayed with me was this: If the shadows weren't the truth, then what was? And how far was I willing to go to find it?

9

The Bronx had a way of etching itself into your identity, even as you tried to carve out a path beyond its borders. By the time I returned home during my first winter break from Binghamton, I realized how much I had changed—and how much I hadn't. The streets felt both familiar and foreign, their rhythms now slightly out of sync with mine. My neighborhood, once my entire world, now felt like a chapter in a larger story I was only beginning to write.

The labyrinth of my identity became more pronounced during that winter break. I would walk down Townsend Avenue, watching some of the same and a different iteration of corner boys huddled under flickering streetlights, their voices rising and falling like the pulse of the block. They noticed me too, calling out with curiosity: "Yo, college boy, you too good for us now?" It was meant as a joke, but the weight of the words lingered. Was I too good? Or was I just trying to be something different? "Don't let those books turn you soft. The streets don't care how many degrees you get."

They weren't wrong. The Bronx had its own set of rules, ones that didn't always align with the principles I was studying in philosophy classes. Nietzsche's "will to power" seemed to echo in the corner boys' swagger, while de Beauvoir's tension between freedom and constraint

mirrored my mother's sacrifices. Yet, these philosophical frameworks felt incomplete when applied to the raw, unfiltered reality of my block.

During one of my walks, I stopped by the handball court where I used to play. The chain-link fence was rusted, the asphalt cracked, but the game continued as if nothing had changed. A group of younger kids were playing, their laughter cutting through the winter air. One boy, no older than 10, served with a determination that reminded me of myself at his age. I wondered what his future held. Would he find a way out, or would the labyrinth pull him deeper?

The concept of the labyrinth had been on my mind since reading Jorge Luis Borges's stories in a literature class. Borges described labyrinths as spaces of infinite complexity, where every path led to another choice, another question. That's what the Bronx felt like to me: a labyrinth of survival and identity, where every decision seemed to carry the weight of a dozen unseen consequences.

One night, I found myself sitting on the stoop of our building, journal in hand, trying to make sense of the contradictions. My mother's voice carried through the window as she spoke on the phone with a relative, her ability to seamlessly navigate her dual reality. She had always been my first teacher in resilience, balancing the weight of her Dominican roots with the demands of a life built in the Bronx.

"You're thinking too much again," she said when she joined me outside, wrapping her shawl tightly against the

cold. "Some things you can't solve with your head. You have to feel your way through them."

Her words reminded me of something I'd read in Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning. He wrote about how purpose wasn't something you found by thinking—it was something you lived. "We can discover this meaning in life in three different ways," Frankl wrote, "by creating a work or doing a deed; by experiencing something or encountering someone; and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering."

I asked two corner boys if they thought I was losing touch with where I came from. They gave me a look that only "Hood Rats" can, a mix of love and exasperation. "You can leave the Bronx," they said, "but it never leaves you. And that's not a bad thing."

Both boys (I'd later find out) were dead within 5 years, yet their words stayed with me as I navigated the tension between who I was and who I was becoming. I began to see the labyrinth not as a trap, but as a test. It wasn't about escaping the Bronx or erasing my roots. It was about finding a way to integrate them into the person I wanted to be.

During that break, I also reconnected with Shawn's younger brother, Luis. Shawn's absence was still palpable on the block, a ghost that lingered in the spaces where he used to stand. Luis had grown quieter since Shawn's death, his laughter less frequent. One evening, as we sat on a bench near the basketball court, he asked me, "Do you ever feel guilty for leaving?"

His question caught me off guard. “Sometimes,” I admitted. “But I don’t think staying would have helped anyone, including me.”

Luis nodded but didn’t say anything more. His silence felt heavy, as if he was carrying questions he didn’t yet know how to ask. I wanted to tell him that leaving didn’t mean forgetting, that building a life outside the Bronx didn’t mean turning your back on it. But I wasn’t sure I fully believed that myself.

A study I read years later in The Journal of Social Psychology explored the concept of "dual identities" in first-generation college students. It found that students who successfully navigated the tension between their home culture and their new academic environment often developed a stronger sense of resilience and adaptability. The key, the study argued, was learning to see these dual identities not as contradictions, but as complementary parts of a whole.

That winter break, I began to glimpse what that might look like for me. The Bronx and Binghamton weren’t opposites; they were pieces of the same puzzle. My time in the Bronx had taught me resilience, resourcefulness, and the value of community. Binghamton was teaching me to ask questions, to seek out answers, and to imagine possibilities beyond survival.

As the break came to an end, I found myself back at the bus station, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder. The sounds of the Bronx faded as the bus pulled away, replaced by the quiet hum of the highway. I stared out the

window, thinking about the labyrinth I was leaving and the one I was heading toward.

The question that lingered in my mind wasn't whether I would find my way out of the labyrinth. It was whether I could learn to navigate it without losing sight of where I had come from.

10

When I first stepped onto Binghamton's campus, it felt like a world apart—clean sidewalks, sprawling lawns, and buildings that seemed to promise endless opportunity. But beneath my awe was a nagging question: Did I belong here?That insecurity followed me like a shadow, pushing me to explore every door the university offered.

That exploration wasn't planned. It began with small, unexpected moments: debates with classmates, random books plucked from library shelves, and professors who saw potential in me long before I recognized it in myself. My life in the Bronx had been about survival, but at Binghamton, it became about discovery.

Yet the seeds of that discovery had been planted long before on Townsend Avenue. It was there, on that noisy block, that I learned to observe, to ask questions. Why did some rise while others fell? Why did certain neighborhoods thrive while others, like my own, seemed forgotten? These questions simmered in my mind, waiting for a place to bloom.

At Binghamton, I found that place. Sociology classes helped me see the Bronx through a microscope, revealing the larger forces shaping the streets I'd called home. One professor, Dr. Fields, made these abstract concepts tangible. During a lecture, she projected a redlining map

from the 1930s and overlaid it with modern statistics on income and education. "These lines," she explained, "didn't just dictate mortgages. They determined dreams." Her words hit me like a lightning bolt. I saw my neighborhood in those jagged lines, reduced to coordinates on a map drawn by someone else.

This was the moment I began connecting the struggles of the Bronx with systemic barriers, a realization echoed in David Durk's book "The Pleasant Avenue Connection." That book laid bare the intertwined forces of personal ambition, systemic corruption, and societal neglect. It told the story of the old man's son, Vinnie, who turned to heroin trafficking for the allure of quick wealth and status. The parallels to my own observations were clear: in both cases, opportunity wasn't just scarce—it was systematically denied.

Vinnie's story mirrors the experiences of the corner boys. His rejection of his father's legitimate trade wasn't rebellion—it was resignation. Faced with bleak labor prospects and the seductive glamour of fast money, he chose the latter. But was this truly a choice? Vinnie's actions force us to ask uncomfortable questions:

Was he aware of the human cost of his decisions, or did he rationalize them as inevitable in a world stacked against him? Could he justify his participation as survival within a corrupt system that left him no viable options? How different might his path have been if society had offered him tangible alternatives?

These questions don't excuse his actions, but they help us see the systemic forces that shape them. As studies on

youth in impoverished neighborhoods reveal, when traditional pathways to success are blocked, individuals are more likely to engage in high-risk activities promising immediate rewards.

The heroin trade Vinnie participated in thrived not just because of desperate laborers but also systemic corruption. Law enforcement officials, incentivized by personal gain, turned blind eyes—or worse, actively participated. This mirrors broader societal flaws: when profit becomes the ultimate measure of success, morality often becomes expendable.

Dr. Fields' lecture on redlining and systemic racism clarified this for me. The jagged lines on the map weren't just historical artifacts—they were wounds that still bled. Similarly, the corruption surrounding the heroin trade exposed in The Pleasant Avenue Connection wasn't an anomaly but a feature of a system prioritizing wealth and power over equity and justice.

At night, in my Binghamton dorm, I wrote in my journal, connecting these lessons to the Bronx. My mother's sacrifices, the the Townsend Avenue corner boys, and even Vinnie's story weren't isolated—they were threads in a larger narrative. I started asking myself: If systems perpetuate inequality, where do we begin to dismantle them? Can ideas alone challenge such entrenched structures, or do we need resources—money, power, platforms?

These questions didn't paralyze me—they fueled me. They pushed me to see education not just as an escape but as a tool to challenge the very systems that shaped my life.

Reading Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed solidified this for me. Freire wrote that education isn't about absorbing knowledge but creating it, using it to transform the world. This echoed the lessons I had learned from my mother and mentors in the Bronx. Education could be liberation if wielded with intention.

But intention isn't enough. The more I learned, the more I questioned my own assumptions. In a political science debate about poverty, a classmate argued that personal responsibility was the key to overcoming hardship. Her words angered me, but they also forced me to reflect: Could personal responsibility coexist with systemic change?

To answer, I turned to research. Studies on early childhood education showed stark results: kids in low-income neighborhoods who attended quality preschools were far more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and avoid incarceration. This reinforced what I had always felt but hadn't articulated: opportunity isn't just about effort—it's about access.

Inspired, I began volunteering with the Youth Service League, tutoring kids who reminded me of my younger self. One boy, Jamal, challenged me with a question: "Why do I need algebra if it won't get me money?" His skepticism was valid, rooted in the immediate survival mindset that neighborhoods like ours foster.

I told him about finding an encyclopedia in the trash and how it opened my world. "It's not about algebra," I explained. "It's about learning to think—to solve problems.

That's something no one can take from you." A week later, Jamal showed up with a math book, ready to learn.

Jamal's spark reminded me why I began this journey. Education isn't just about escaping—it's about helping others find their way. Vinnie's story, my Bronx upbringing, and my Binghamton education all underscore this truth: systems shape us, but reflection and action can reshape systems.

The seeds of curiosity planted on Townsend Avenue have grown into a purpose. They drive me to keep asking hard questions and seek answers that challenge injustice, inequality, and complacency.

Ultimately, education isn't just a way out—it's a way forward.

11

There's a saying I once heard on the block: "The streets don't forget." It's a reminder that the Bronx, for all its chaos and movement, carries a memory. Every crack in the sidewalk, every faded mural, every story told on a stoop—they're all part of a living history, a narrative shaped by those who call the streets home. For me, no part of that narrative was as vivid or as haunting as the lives of the corner boys.

The corner boys were the unspoken rulers of Townsend Avenue, their presence as reliable as the sunrise. They weren't just individuals; they were an institution, a fixture of the block that everyone acknowledged but few truly understood. They were teenagers and young men who gathered on the corners, their lives shaped by an ecosystem of survival that often left little room for dreaming beyond the next day.

One of the most memorable was Ricky, a boy who seemed to embody both the charisma and the tragedy of the corner boy archetype. Ricky had a way of making everyone feel seen, his laugh contagious, his stories exaggerated but captivating. To us younger kids, he was a hero—a symbol of the freedom and power we thought we wanted. But even as a child, I could sense the fragility beneath his swagger. Ricky's life, like so many others, was

precariously balanced on the edge of a system that offered him no safety net.

The corner boys' shadows loomed large in my understanding of the Bronx, but it wasn't until years later, at Binghamton, that I began to understand the forces shaping their lives. In a sociology class, my professor introduced us to ideas best articulated in Thomas Piketty's 2014 book "Capital in the Twenty-First Century." Piketty argued that economic inequality is not a bug in the system but a feature—a result of structural forces that concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a few. His research showed how policies, historical trends, and capital accumulation perpetuate cycles of poverty, leaving communities like mine trapped in their own history.

Reading these economic hypothesis felt like peeling back the layers of the Bronx to reveal the machinery underneath. The corner boys weren't just making bad choices; they were navigating a system that had been rigged against them long before they were born. From redlining to underfunded schools, the Bronx was a case study in systemic inequality, a place where the odds were stacked so heavily that success felt more like an exception than a rule.

But this sociology class perspective wasn't the only one I encountered during my time at Binghamton. In an economics seminar, we studied Walter Block, a libertarian economist who offered a starkly different view. Block argued that individuals, not systems, were the key to change. His work emphasized personal responsibility and the power of free markets to create opportunity. Block

would argue the tragic choices made by the corner boys are symptoms of a system that criminalizes consensual trades and stifles entrepreneurial potential in disadvantaged communities. Prohibition and restrictive economic policies create black markets that attract those left with few other options. If the state allowed for freer markets and reduced barriers to legitimate entrepreneurship, these individuals would have access to opportunities that don't force them into morally fraught decisions. It's not capitalism that fails them but the distortions imposed upon it by government interference.

For the corner boys, this perspective suggested that their circumstances were a result of choices, not systems—a narrative that felt both liberating and harsh.

Thomas Sowell, another economist we studied, added nuance to this debate. Sowell, like Block, championed the idea of personal responsibility, but he also acknowledged the role of culture and history in shaping opportunities. He criticized what he called the "dependency mindset," arguing that focusing solely on systemic barriers could strip individuals of their agency. At the same time, Sowell's work recognized that history matters—that policies like redlining and Jim Crow had created disparities that couldn't simply be wished away.

These conflicting perspectives left me grappling with questions that had no easy answers. Was Ricky a victim of systemic forces, as Piketty might argue? Or was he responsible for his own choices, as Block and Sowell suggested? The truth, I realized, was somewhere in between.

One summer, during a break from school, I returned to the Bronx with these questions swirling in my mind. I found myself drawn back to the corner where Ricky and the others used to gather. The scene hadn't changed much: new faces, same dynamics. The corner boys still played their roles, their laughter masking an undercurrent of unease.

I struck up a conversation with Javi, a boy I'd known growing up who had now taken Ricky's place as the unofficial leader of the group. Javi was older now, his face marked by the wear and tear of the streets. As we talked, I asked him how he saw his life.

"It's not like we got a lot of options, you know?" he said, shrugging. "You hustle, you make it work. Ain't nobody coming to save us."

Javi's words echoed Sowell's emphasis on agency but also highlighted the structural barriers Piketty described. He wasn't sitting around waiting for a handout, but the opportunities he needed—a good job, a safe neighborhood, access to education—were scarce.

I thought about Block's argument for free markets and how it might apply to Javi's situation. Could entrepreneurship offer him a way out? The corner boys were already entrepreneurs in their own way, navigating supply and demand, managing risk, and building networks. But their market was one of survival, not growth. Without access to capital or legitimate opportunities, their hustles were limited to the margins.

Most summers, I volunteered as a baseball coach, working with teens who reminded me of Javi and Ricky.

One boy, Jimmy, stood out. He was sharp, ambitious, and full of questions. During a conversation on financial literacy, he asked, "Why don't they teach this stuff in school? It's like they don't want us to know how to win."

Jimmy's question brought me back to Piketty. The system, by design or neglect, didn't equip kids like Jimmy with the tools they needed to succeed. But it also reminded me of Sowell's point about agency. Jimmy wasn't waiting for someone to hand him a better life—he was trying to figure out how to build it himself.

I began to see the corner boys not as symbols of failure but as reflections of resilience. They were adapting to a world that had given them few resources and even fewer chances. Their shadows weren't just dark—they were complex, shaped by a mix of systemic barriers and individual choices. These boys weren't selling drugs as part of a plan to get out of the Bronx, they were counting on the hustle to buy eggs, bread, sneakers and trinkets.

One evening, after a long day of baseball practice at Youth Service, I sat down with my journal on the train and tried to make sense of it all. I wrote about Ricky, Javi, Jimmy, and the countless others who had shaped my understanding of the Bronx. I wrote about Piketty's theories and their relevance to the neighborhood's history, about Block's emphasis on personal responsibility, and about Sowell's nuanced approach to balancing agency and structure.

But more than anything, I wrote about the need for empathy. These debates—about systems versus choices, history versus agency—weren't just academic. They were

about real people, real lives. And if there was one thing I had learned from the corner boys, it was that their stories couldn't be reduced to a single narrative.

As I closed my journal that night, I thought about the shadows that stretched across the Bronx. They were long and complicated, shaped by history and circumstance, but they weren't immovable. The question that lingered in my mind wasn't just how to illuminate those shadows, but how to honor the lives they represented while working to change the systems that cast them.

The corner boys taught me that resilience is a form of brilliance, that survival is its own kind of resistance. And while their shadows may have been shaped by the streets, they were not defined by them. They were, and always will be, more than the corners they called home.

12

My relationship with money began long before I understood its complexities. It was shaped by the women in my family—my mother, Maritza, and her grandmother, Colasa Reyes Astacio. These women were merchants, educators, and survivors. From them, I learned that money is not just about earning; it's about creating, sustaining, and, ultimately, empowering. My mother's example taught me the difference between working for money and having money work for you, a lesson that became the foundation of my entrepreneurial journey and my eventual understanding of the twelve forms of value.

My mother's story began in San Pedro De Macoris, where she was born in 1947. Her father's death when she was just two years old forced my grandmother to leave her rural home to seek work in Santo Domingo. Raised by her grandmother Colasa, my mother absorbed lessons in self-reliance and market acumen. Colasa had moved her family to San Pedro to access better schools and market opportunities, transforming her knowledge of farming into a skill set fit for an urban environment. This decision marked a generational shift—from subsistence farming to commerce—and planted the seeds of entrepreneurial thinking in my family.

When my family moved to New York, my mother continued to embody this entrepreneurial spirit. By day, she worked as a seamstress, mastering machines to make herself indispensable. On the weekends, she sold bed linens at laundromats, often recruiting me to help her. I became her assistant, interpreter, and, on occasion, business partner. It was during one of these ventures that I made my first significant business decision—selling dresses she had received as payment instead of cash. Within hours, I had turned $75 worth of dresses into $107. That was the moment I realized I had a knack for identifying value and putting it into action.

I also watched my mother organize sociedades with her coworkers, and it felt like witnessing an age-old ritual of trust and solidarity. Each week, participants contributed to a communal pot, taking turns to receive the payout. What struck me most was how naturally it operated—no contracts, no interest, just a mutual understanding that everyone would honor their commitment. Later in life, I learned about similar systems in other cultures, like the Jewish Gemach, where acts of loving-kindness drive interest-free loans, or the Islamic Qard Hasan, rooted in the Quran's emphasis on charity and righteousness. In West Africa, Susu and Esusu functioned much the same way, as did Chit Funds in India and Tanomoshi-ko in Japan. Each system carried its own cultural flavor, but they all shared a common thread: mutual trust as currency. My mother's sociedades reminded me that financial systems don't have to exploit or alienate—they can be tools of empowerment, deeply rooted in human connection. Reflecting on these traditions,

I see how these communal practices bridge the gap for those excluded from formal financial institutions, offering not just money but dignity and belonging.

By the time I attended Binghamton University, my understanding of money and value had deepened. My mother's lessons were foundational, but my experiences—from selling fireworks in my neighborhood to launching two businesses—taught me the practical side of entrepreneurship. These ventures weren't just about making money; they were about understanding and leveraging the 12 forms of value:

Product: Creating something tangible that satisfies a need. For me, this began with selling fireworks and later cars.

Service: Providing a skill or expertise to others. My mother's tailoring services taught me this form of value.

Shared Resource: Offering access to assets like tools or vehicles. My car business aligned with this principle by providing reliable transportation to students.

Subscription: Delivering consistent value over time. My mother's "sociedades" embodied this form, pooling resources for mutual benefit.

Resale: Purchasing items and selling them for profit. From linens to dresses to cars, this was a cornerstone of my early ventures.

Lease: Allowing others to use assets for a fee. While I didn't lease cars, extending warranties mimicked this value by offering continued assurance.

Agency: Acting as an intermediary, like I did when facilitating jewelry sales through associates.

Audience Aggregation: Capturing attention and delivering value. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, building trust within my neighborhood was a form of this value.

Loan: Providing resources with an expectation of repayment. My failed attempt to lend money to a childhood friend underscored the risks involved.

Capital: Investing in ventures that yield returns. My businesses reflected this principle, particularly when reinvesting profits.

Insurance: Protecting against risk. My extended car warranties were an informal application of this concept.

Option: Providing opportunities with minimal commitment. My low-cost car sales offered flexibility to students on tight budgets.

Understanding these forms of value transformed how I approached money and business. Each form represents a different way to create and deliver value, offering opportunities for growth and resilience. But they also require critical thinking, self-confrontation, and a willingness to adapt.

Not every venture succeeded. My attempt to broker "sociedades" among peers ended in frustration, with late payments and broken trust. Lending money to some of my childhood friends taught me that not all opportunities are worth pursuing, especially when they conflict with my values. These failures weren't just setbacks; they were lessons in the importance of alignment between personal integrity and business decisions.

At Binghamton, I applied what I had learned to start two businesses using financial aid money. I launched a car resale venture, leveraging relationships with independent dealers to purchase vehicles at wholesale prices. By pricing cars within the range of financial aid refund checks and offering extended warranties, I created a business model that aligned with student needs.

Simultaneously, I partnered with Greg W., a friend in the jewelry business, to sell jewelry through a network of associates. This venture taught me the importance of delegation and trust, as I relied on others to expand my reach while maintaining quality and service.

These experiences reinforced the importance of frugality and reinvestment. Living simply allowed me to maximize profits and create opportunities for growth. But they also taught me the value of relationships—whether with suppliers, customers, or partners. Trust and communication were as essential as the financial transactions themselves.

To understand the 12 forms of value and their potential, ask yourself these questions:

What tangible need can you meet in your community?
What skills or expertise do you have that others value?
What assets can you share to create value?
How can you deliver consistent value over time?
What items can you buy and sell for profit?
How can you monetize the use of your assets?
How can you connect others while earning a return?
How can you capture and deliver value to an audience?

How can you lend resources responsibly?

What ventures can you invest in for long-term returns?

How can you offer protection against risk?

How can you provide opportunities with minimal commitment?

Building wealth is as much about mindset as it is about strategy. For me, self-confrontation was essential. It required asking hard questions and being honest about my motivations, strengths, and limitations. Was I driven by greed or by a desire to create meaningful value? Was I leveraging opportunities responsibly, or was I taking unnecessary risks?

These questions were not always easy to answer, but they were necessary. They kept me grounded and aligned with my values, ensuring that my pursuits were not just profitable but purposeful.

The 12 forms of value are not just about making money; they are about building a life that reflects your values and aspirations. They are about creating opportunities, fostering connections, and contributing to something larger than yourself. For me, they have been a compass, guiding me through the complexities of entrepreneurship and personal growth.

As I look back on my journey, I see how each form of value has played a role in shaping who I am and what I strive to achieve. They are not just tools for business; they are principles for living—principles that remind me to stay

curious, adaptable, and committed to the work of becoming.

A study published by the Journal of Marriage and Family underscores the profound role family plays as the primary source of education, shaping not only our values but our perceptions of agency and responsibility. While institutions like Ivy League schools such as Harvard offer frameworks to refine our understanding of societal systems, it is within the family structure that we first learn how to navigate them. These early lessons often dictate whether we view ourselves as passive participants or active agents in our own lives. For me, growing up in a family of merchants, this education was deeply intertwined with resilience and creativity. The challenge, then, is how to translate these lessons for those who, like the corner boys I knew, have been handed a fragmented map of the world. How do we teach them the enduring power of financial literacy and the time value of money—tools for building agency—instead of merely offering them the low-hanging fruit that capitalism unapologetically dangles? By pairing objective empathy with strategies to confront systemic barriers, we can empower them not just to survive but to thrive within an unforgiving economic structure.

Many corner boys struggle to grasp these concepts because the foundation of their education—their family environment—is often marked by instability, scarcity, and a lack of examples demonstrating agency. In such fragmented or dysfunctional settings, essential values like resilience, delayed gratification, and strategic thinking

rarely take root. These are the very principles required to understand complex ideas like financial literacy and the time value of money. Instead, survival takes precedence. Systemic barriers such as poverty, underfunded education, and generational trauma condition them to focus on immediate needs, leaving little room for long-term planning.

This creates a mindset defined by urgency: solving today's problems without the luxury—or sometimes even the awareness—of planning for tomorrow. The allure of quick money from hustling or illegal activities fits seamlessly into this worldview, offering a seemingly tangible escape. Yet, systemic inequality reinforces a sense of powerlessness, making abstract concepts like agency and responsibility feel irrelevant in a reality where external forces often appear to control outcomes.

Pito, an old head from the neighborhood, 48 years old going on 92, his voice deliberate and heavy with the weight of 25 years inside. "You know, Jose, it wasn't just one moment that made me see the truth. It was a hundred little cracks in the lie I was living. The first big one came after sentencing, sitting in that cell, staring at a wall I'd see for years to come. I used to think the hustle was my freedom, my way of beating the system. But that day, it hit me: everything I thought I controlled was controlling me instead. The money, the cars, the respect—it was all counterfeit. Just like ignorance. I traded on people's lack of knowledge because that's all I knew how to do. But ignorance collects interest, and when the bill comes, you

don't just pay with money—you pay with years. The hustle wasn't a ticket out; it was a leash. And the harder I pulled, the tighter it got. I didn't realize the leash was there until it choked me."

He paused, meeting my gaze. "The old man in your crooked ladder story I overheard you telling? It's easy to laugh at him, but here's the real joke: most of us don't even know we're climbing until we fall. And by then, the pit doesn't just look like home—it feels like it's the only place we belong. The path behind us? That's like a language we never learned. If you want to teach these boys, you've got to show them the leash before it tightens. But let me tell you, Jose, most of them won't believe you until they're gasping for air."

The Crooked Ladder

Back in my days in The Bronx, there was a ladder leaning against a crooked wall. The boys on the corner saw the ladder as their way out—a quick climb to the top. But the ladder was old, its rungs shaky and uneven, and the wall itself leaned precariously over a deep pit.

The first boy, eager and desperate, scrambled up the ladder. At first, it seemed sturdy enough. The higher he climbed, the more he shouted down to his friends below. "This is the way! I'm going to see the world from the top!" But as he reached the midpoint, the ladder swayed violently. His friends yelled for him to come down, but pride and fear kept him climbing. One wrong step, and he fell—not into the freedom he imagined but into the pit below.

The second boy, watching this unfold, hesitated. He studied the ladder but decided to climb anyway, convinced that he would make it further by being smarter. He did—two rungs higher. But the same crooked wall tilted, and gravity didn't care about his cleverness. He, too, fell into the pit.

The third boy paused, staring at the ladder. "What's the alternative?" he muttered to himself. He didn't see another way out, so he leaned on the wall beneath the ladder, waiting for his turn, still tethered to the same false hope.

One day, an old man came by. His clothes were simple, his voice steady. "You boys have it wrong," he said. "The ladder isn't your way out. It's a trap."

"Then what's the way out?" one of them scoffed.

The old man pointed to a small path winding behind them. It was overgrown with weeds, rocky, and steep. "It's harder and slower," he said, "but it leads somewhere real. The ladder is a shortcut to nowhere."

The boys laughed. "That's easy for you to say. You're not the one stuck here."

The old man nodded. "True. But I was. I've climbed that ladder, and I've fallen. I've seen where it leads."

Two of the boys dismissed him, their pride too great, their focus too narrow. But the third boy, the one who had hesitated before climbing, looked back at the path. Slowly, with doubt still clouding his mind, he took his first step away from the ladder.

13

I had always felt the weight of the world pressing down on me, but it wasn't until I submitted my story to the Soft White Underbelly Channel in 2022, reading their polite rejection of my submission, that I truly began to understand the depth of my own blind spots. They hadn't given me a reason, just the cold formality of a "no thank you." It wasn't personal, I knew that. But the sting of rejection still lingered, pulling at something deep within me. Maybe it was the failure to connect, or perhaps it was the realization that my own story, like so many others I had witnessed, had been deemed too boring and unworthy of the kind of attention I thought it deserved.

And yet, it was in the quiet aftermath of this rejection that I was reminded of the lesson I'd learned from the streets of New York in the 70s and 80s—the lesson of duality, of complexity. The dualities of human nature, the light and dark that existed side by side, in every corner of the city, in every soul that walked its streets. The people I had known growing up, those I had interacted with and observed, were no different from those featured in the raw, unfiltered portraits shown by the Soft White Underbelly channel. Both groups were products of the same system, shaped by forces beyond their control, but capable of acts

of grace, moments of profound clarity, despite—or perhaps because of—their circumstances.

I had grown up in a time and place where survival was an art form. The streets of the Bronx were filled with people who had learned to make peace with their own suffering, yet at the same time, there was something in them that refused to accept defeat. It was this paradox that made them both tragic and heroic. Maquetumba, a drug dealer whom I knew, had embodied that paradox. He had been a mentor to Chango, a young man whose own story became intertwined with mine in ways I never could have predicted.

I remember the day Maquetumba was killed by my grandmother's apartment. It happened on 109th Street, just off Amsterdam avenue. The day was still, too still for something so violent. I watched the corner boys from 109th street scattered like cockroaches, unwilling to speak of what they had seen. Fear was a constant companion in those days, and the threat of retribution was often enough to silence even the most willing witnesses. Yet, in the face of such an overwhelming silence, there was Chango. Even as he was steeped in the same culture of fear and violence, he did something remarkable years later. From the depths of that same prison system that had helped shape him, Chango found the moral clarity to persuade Matias Reyes to confess to the crime that had wrongfully imprisoned the Central Park Five. That act, that moment of integrity amidst the chaos, struck me deeply.

It was as if a tiny crack had formed in the wall of despair that surrounded us, revealing the possibility of redemption —even for those who seemed the most lost. In that moment,

I understood something profound: moments of clarity and altruism could emerge from the darkest of places. And it wasn't just about Chango or Maquetumba, or even the Central Park Five. It was about the people we often overlook, the ones living on the edges of society, whose stories we never hear. It was about the potential within all of us to rise above our circumstances, to find our humanity even in the most inhumane of situations.

These types of rejections triggered something within me, pushing me to confront my own blind spots. I had once believed that empathy could heal all wounds, that understanding would bridge the gaps between us. But I began to see that even empathy had its limits. After all, I had witnessed firsthand how the streets and their people could be reduced to mere symbols, their struggles simplified into narratives that were easier to digest but ultimately did them a disservice. This is where the real complexity of human nature lay—within the shadows that we often failed to acknowledge.

In reflecting on these moments, I couldn't help but draw parallels to the world I had encountered during my time in Binghamton University. The theories I studied in sociology and economics had opened my eyes to the systemic forces at play, but they also revealed something more personal: our beliefs shape our actions. The beggar who pretended to be mentally ill and eventually became mentally ill was a perfect example of how a self-fulfilling prophecy could become a reality. Could the same be said for the corner boys I grew up with? Could their lives, defined by violence

and despair, be seen as a product of the environment, of a system that had failed them long before they were born?

As I sat with these thoughts, I realized that what had once seemed like a rejection was actually an invitation to dig deeper. It was a challenge to confront my own blind spots, to confront the biases and limitations that I had placed on others—and myself. This was something I had witnessed throughout my life, whether it was in the streets of the Bronx or in the halls of academia: people often failed to see the full complexity of those around them.

Take JD Vance, for example. His book, Hillbilly Elegy, offered an insight into the struggles of working-class America, but it also revealed the limitations of his own worldview. He seemed to view the people he grew up with as victims of their own choices, failing to fully acknowledge the systemic forces that shaped their lives. It was a perspective that resonated with the libertarian ideas of Walter Block, who argued that individuals were responsible for their own success or failure, irrespective of the systems around them. But what Vance and Block failed to consider, at least in my eyes, was the role of history—of culture, of class, of the inherited burdens that many of us carried without even realizing it.

And then there was Donald Trump. His approach to leadership was a masterclass in fear, in crafting a narrative that divided people into us versus them, winners versus losers. His rhetoric, often harsh and divisive, struck a chord with many, but it also left behind a wake of alienation and resentment. Trump's blind spot lay in his failure to recognize the humanity of those he deemed "losers." He

saw them as products of their own shortcomings, failing to see the systemic inequalities that shaped their lives. This same failure of empathy, this same blindness to the complexities of human existence, was evident in his policies and his approach to leadership.

Kamala Harris, too, was not exempt from these blind spots. Her political rise, fueled by the power of identity politics and her position within the Democratic establishment, often seemed at odds with the struggles of the very people she claimed to represent. In her speeches and policies, there was a sense of urgency, but not always the clarity needed to address the deeper, systemic issues that perpetuated inequality. She, like Trump, seemed to be trapped in her own narrative—one that didn't always reflect the complexities of the lives of those on the margins.

It was these leaders, these flawed human beings, who made me realize that the world I had witnessed—the world of Maquetumba, Chango, and the corner boys—was not so different from the world that these leaders inhabited. They, too, were products of their own environments, shaped by the systems and beliefs that defined them. And like me, they were also blind to the forces that shaped their perceptions of the world.

But through all of this, I came to understand something that Dostoevsky had taught me long ago: that the world is not black and white, good and evil, but a spectrum of human experience, filled with contradictions and complexities. We are all capable of great good and great harm, depending on the circumstances, the choices we make, and the systems that govern our lives. We are all, in

our own ways, struggling to find meaning in an indifferent universe. But it is through that struggle, through those contradictions, that we find our humanity.

It was not the rejection that had broken me, but the realization that I had failed to see the full depth of my own story, and the stories of others. I had lived much of my life in the shadows of the corner boys, believing I understood their plight, their struggle. But in truth, I had only seen a fraction of the picture. Now, I was learning to look deeper, to embrace the complexity of the world around me, and to recognize that while we may never have all the answers, it is in our willingness to ask the difficult questions that we find meaning.

As I sit here, reflecting on all that I have learned and witnessed, I know that I am just another figure in the ever-evolving narrative of the Bronx, of America, of the world. But I also know that it is in embracing the contradictions, the flaws, and the complexities of life that we find our way forward. And that, in the end, is the true power of storytelling: not to simplify the world, but to reveal its raw, unfiltered truth, and in doing so, find a way to create meaning out of the chaos.

14

The transition from the stoops of Townsend Avenue to running a juice bar in Brooklyn wasn't as drastic as it might seem. In many ways, Stoop Juice became an extension of the world I had grown up in—a place where stories collided, where the lives of strangers intersected in small but meaningful ways. If the Bronx had taught me resilience and observation, Stoop Juice taught me reflection. It became a microcosm for the world at large, a space where the dualities of human nature played out daily, one smoothie at a time.

Running the juice bar wasn't just about serving drinks; it was about building connections. Customers came from all walks of life: young professionals, healthy eating foodies, single mothers, retirees, students, and the occasional drifter. Each of them carried their own stories, their own struggles, and their own blind spots. And in the quiet moments between orders, I began to see parallels between their lives and the world I had left behind in the Bronx.

One regular, Ms. Clara, was a retired teacher who spent her mornings reading The New York Times while drinking her green juice. She once told me about her years teaching in underfunded schools, her voice tinged with both pride and regret. "You try to make a difference," she said, "but

sometimes it feels like you're patching up a dam with duct tape." Her words reminded me of my mother's struggles, of her quiet heroism in the face of systemic challenges.

And then there was Reggie, a young man who worked doing food deliveries on his e-bike. He had the same restless energy I remembered from the corner boys, always moving, always looking for the next hustle. One day, as he waited for his acai bowl, he asked me about the stack of books behind the counter. I had been reading Thomas Piketty's Capital again, underlining passages about wealth inequality and capital accumulation.

"What's that about?" Reggie asked, his curiosity genuine.

"It's about money," I said simply. "How it works, who has it, and why most people don't."

Reggie nodded thoughtfully. "So, like, it's not just about working hard, right? There's more to it than that."

"Exactly," I said. "It's about the systems we're born into. But hard work still matters. It's just not the whole story."

Our conversation stayed with me, not because it was groundbreaking, but because it was a reminder of how little most people understood about the systems shaping their lives. Reggie's question wasn't just about Piketty; it was about the Bronx, about the corner boys, about all of us trying to navigate a world that often felt rigged.

At night, after closing up the shop, I would sit in the quiet and think about the lessons I had learned from the streets, from Binghamton, and now from Stoop Juice. The juice bar had become a laboratory for understanding the human condition, a place where theories collided with

reality. It was here that I began to question some of the ideas I had taken for granted.

For instance, Walter Block's libertarian arguments about personal responsibility took on new meaning when I thought about Reggie. Block's perspective wasn't wrong—agency mattered—but it felt incomplete. Reggie wasn't just a product of his choices; he was also a product of his circumstances. He was navigating a system that had set him up to fail, and yet, he was still trying.

Thomas Sowell's critique of dependency also resonated. At Stoop Juice, I saw firsthand how easy it was for people to fall into cycles of dependence—on routines, on substances, on narratives that limited their potential. But Sowell's emphasis on culture and history also felt inadequate at times. The stories I heard at the juice bar weren't just about culture; they were about pain, trauma, and a lack of resources.

One night, while reading Dostoevsky, I stumbled upon a passage that captured what I had been grappling with: "Man is broad, too broad, indeed. I'd have him narrower." Dostoevsky wasn't just talking about human nature; he was talking about the complexity of our lives, the contradictions that defined us. At Stoop Juice, I saw that complexity every day.

There was the woman who ordered a green juice with extra ginger every morning but always complained about its bitterness, as if expecting it to change. There was the man who tipped generously despite his worn-out shoes, a small act of defiance against his own scarcity. And there

was Reggie, who continued to ask questions, slowly piecing together a worldview that made sense to him.

As I reflected on these moments, I began to see Stoop Juice not just as a business, but as a metaphor for life. The ingredients we chose, the combinations we created, the care we put into each drink—they were all acts of creation, of finding meaning in the chaos. And like life, not every blend worked. Sometimes the flavors clashed, sometimes the balance was off. But every attempt was a step toward understanding, a way of navigating the complexities of existence.

Running Stoop Juice also forced me to confront my own blind spots. I had always prided myself on empathy, on my ability to see the humanity in others. But there were times when I failed. There were customers who annoyed me, whose stories I dismissed as unimportant. There were moments when I let my own biases cloud my judgment.

One such moment came when a woman, let's call her Carla, started frequenting the juice bar. Carla was a lesbian with a background in operations management specializing in specialty food startups. She didn't wear a MAGA hat, put was unapologetically "Pro Trump". I found myself avoiding her, staying quiet while processing her orders.

But one evening, Carla stayed behind after closing. "Can I talk to you for a second?" she asked, her tone unusually subdued.

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"I lost my wife last year," she said, her voice cracking. "This place… it's the only thing that gets me out of the house some days."

Her words floored me. In that moment, Carla wasn't a caricature of political division; she was a grieving woman trying to find solace in a world that had betrayed her. It was a humbling reminder of the limits of my own empathy, of the need to look beyond the surface.

Stoop Juice became a place of learning, not just for my customers, but for me. It taught me that resilience wasn't just about survival; it was about connection. It showed me that complexity wasn't something to be feared, but embraced. And it reminded me that the stories we tell—about ourselves, about others—are never the whole story.

The juice bar wasn't the Bronx, but it carried echoes of it. It wasn't Binghamton, but it challenged me in similar ways. It was a bridge between worlds, a place where the lessons of my past and the questions of my future converged.

As I locked up the shop one night, I thought about the stoops of Townsend Avenue, about Ricky, Maquetumba, and Chango. I thought about the theories of Piketty, Block, and Sowell, about the conversations with Reggie and Ms. Clara, about Carla's unexpected vulnerability. Each of them had added a layer to my understanding of the world, a thread to the tapestry I was weaving.

Stoop Juice wasn't just a juice bar; it was a reflection of life itself—messy, complex, and beautiful. And in its quiet, unassuming way, it had become a place where I could continue the work of self-confrontation, of asking the difficult questions, and of finding meaning in the chaos.

15

I used to think empathy was a kind of magic trick. That if I just listened hard enough, read enough philosophy, or quoted Viktor Frankl at the right moment, I could connect with anyone. But empathy isn't magic. It's more like a muscle—one that cramps up when you haven't stretched it in a while. And sometimes, it's not even a muscle. Sometimes it's a mirror. And what you see in it? That's where things get uncomfortable.

Let me explain.

One afternoon at Stoop Juice, a kid named Isaiah came in with his little sister. He couldn't have been more than ten, but he had that Bronx swagger—chin up, eyes sharp, voice louder than necessary. He ordered a smoothie like he was closing a business deal.

"Let me get the mango-pineapple, no banana. Banana's nasty."

I smiled. "You sure? Banana's the glue that holds the smoothie together."

He looked at me like I'd just insulted his entire family. "I don't need glue. I need flavor."

Touché.

As I made his smoothie, his sister—maybe six years old—started crying. Isaiah rolled his eyes. "She always does this.

She wants what I got, even though she said she didn't want anything."

I handed him the smoothie. "You want to share?"

He hesitated. Then, with the dramatic sigh of a much older man, he handed it to her. "Fine. But she better not backwash."

She took a sip and smiled. He watched her, then looked at me and said, "She's annoying, but she's mine."

That moment hit me harder than I expected. Because in that one sentence—"She's annoying, but she's mine"—was a whole philosophy of love. Messy, reluctant, unfiltered love. The kind that doesn't wait for people to be easy to love. The kind that shows up anyway.

And it made me wonder: When was the last time I loved someone like that?

🌀 Here's a question I've started asking myself: Do I only empathize with people who make it easy?

Because if I'm honest, I've spent a lot of time trying to connect with people who already speak my language—people who read the same books, ask the same questions, vote the same way. But what about the people who don't? What about the ones who interrupt, who contradict, who make me feel like I'm not the smartest person in the room?

That's where empathy gets uncomfortable. That's where it stops being a virtue and starts being a choice.

Take Carla, for example. You've met her in earlier chapters—the grieving Trump supporter with a sharp tongue and a sharper mind. I used to avoid her. Not because she was rude, but because she made me feel…

exposed. Like she could see through my intellectual armor and wasn't impressed.

One day, she asked me, "Why do you always talk like you're writing a thesis?"

I laughed, but it stung. Because she was right. I was hiding behind my words. Behind my quotes. Behind my carefully curated worldview.

So I asked her, "What would you rather I say?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Something real."

That's when I realized: sometimes, the smartest thing you can say is nothing. Sometimes, the most empathetic thing you can do is shut up and let someone else be the expert on their own pain.

🌀 Another question I've started asking: Am I listening to understand, or listening to respond?

Because there's a difference. One makes space. The other fills it.

And then there's humor.

Humor is tricky. It can be a bridge or a barrier. A way in or a way out. I've used it both ways. Sometimes to connect. Sometimes to deflect.

Like the time a customer asked if we had a "detox juice for toxic relationships." I said, "Sure. It's called 'Leave.' Comes with a side of boundaries and a shot of self-respect."

She laughed. Then she cried. Then she told me about her ex.

That's the thing about humor—it opens doors. But only if you're willing to walk through them.

🌀 So here's another question: Do I use humor to connect, or to protect?

Because sometimes, I'm not joking to make you laugh. I'm joking to keep you from looking too closely. At me. At my fear. At the parts of myself I haven't made peace with yet.

And that brings me to Sisyphus.

You know the story. Guy pushes a boulder up a hill. It rolls back down. He pushes it again. Forever.

When I first read Camus' take on it, I thought, "That's bleak." But now? I think Sisyphus was onto something.

Because maybe the point isn't to reach the top. Maybe the point is to keep pushing. To keep showing up. To keep choosing empathy, even when it's awkward. To keep choosing humor, even when it's risky. To keep choosing connection, even when it's easier to walk away.

🌀 Final question: What if the boulder is the people we don't understand—and the hill is our own ego?

What if the real work isn't to change them, but to change how we carry them?

That's what I'm learning. Slowly. Imperfectly. One smoothie, one conversation, one uncomfortable moment at a time.

And maybe that's enough.

16

Running Stoop Juice had shown me the beauty and complexity of human nature, but it had also left me with more questions than answers. The patterns of survival and resilience I observed in my customers mirrored the struggles I had witnessed growing up in the Bronx. Yet, every attempt to unravel those patterns seemed to lead to more knots.

It was in this tension, between what I thought I understood and what I had yet to grasp, that I began to dwell. I wasn't just searching for answers anymore; I was searching for the right questions. It was becoming clear to me that the questions themselves were as important as the answers they might yield.

The questions we ask about love, identity, and resilience rarely yield definitive answers. These inquiries are complex, full of contradictions, and rich with lessons that challenge our assumptions. This chapter is an exploration of this paradox, a recognition that the search for meaning often leads us to deeper uncertainties rather than resolutions.

The question of love is perhaps the most intricate of all. Jacques Derrida, in his reflection on love, famously posed, "The difference between the who and the what at the heart of love separates the heart." He asks whether love arises from the unique singularity of a person—their "who"—or

from the qualities and attributes that define them—their "what." This distinction pierces to the core of romantic and platonic relationships alike, highlighting the fragility of human connections. When we fall in love, is it with the essence of a person, or with the attributes that initially seduce us? And when love falters, is it because the "what" no longer satisfies, or because the "who" was never fully understood?

This duality—the who and the what—creates a tension that defines much of human experience. Often, love begins with an attraction to certain qualities: a shared sense of humor, a captivating smile, or an intellect that challenges us. Yet, as Derrida notes, disillusionment often arises when we realize the other person isn't what we imagined. The attributes that once drew us in can become the very reasons we pull away. This contradiction underscores the fleeting nature of certainty in love.

I remember reflecting on this at Stoop Juice, where I spent countless hours thinking about how these ideas applied to my life. Take, for instance, the love between friends. Friendship often grows from shared experiences and mutual understanding—the "what"—but it is sustained by an appreciation for the other's essence—the "who." Yet, even in friendships, misunderstandings and unmet expectations can cause fractures. I have experienced moments where I discovered that the "what" I admired was a projection of my desires rather than a reflection of the friend's true self. Still, the bonds of friendship persisted because of a shared willingness to navigate these uncertainties.

Lacan's perspective deepens this analysis by suggesting that love, at its core, is not about truly knowing the other. Instead, it is about engaging with the other's lack—the aspects of them that remain unknown and unknowable. Lacan posits that love is sustained by this gap, by the mystery that keeps us intrigued and connected. It is not the resolution of the who versus the what but the persistent tension between them that gives love its vitality.

David Hume, with his empiricist philosophy, adds yet another layer. He reminds us that human knowledge is inherently limited—a collection of impressions and associations shaped by our senses. In love, as in life, we operate with incomplete information. We construct narratives about ourselves and others, filling in gaps with assumptions that may or may not hold true. Yet, as Hume might argue, this does not diminish the value of love. Instead, it highlights the courage required to embrace connection despite the uncertainties.

This interplay between uncertainty and resilience extends beyond love to the broader human condition. Resilience, after all, is the ability to continue despite the absence of clear answers. It is the acknowledgment that we may never fully know ourselves or those we love, yet we press on. In the words of Viktor Frankl, meaning is not something we discover but something we create through our actions and choices. The process of asking—even without answers—is itself an act of resilience.

Reflecting on these ideas during downtime at Stoop Juice, I often thought about how this theme of questioning tied into one's illusions and self-reflection. Our questions

about love, identity, and resilience are not meant to resolve into tidy conclusions but to guide us toward deeper engagement with life's complexities. Stoop Juice became a sanctuary for such reflections, a space where I could wrestle with my doubts and find solace in the act of questioning itself.

Looking ahead, this exploration of love's paradoxes lays the groundwork for examining how we reconcile idealism with reality. If the who and the what divide our hearts, then the next step is to explore how we integrate these divisions into a cohesive understanding of ourselves and our relationships. The journey is not about erasing the tension but about learning to live within it.

In my own life, the paradox of love has been both a source of inspiration and a reminder of my limitations. I think of my mother, whose sacrifices for our family were acts of love defined not by words but by actions. Her "who"—a resilient and pragmatic woman—was inseparable from her "what"—a seamstress, a provider, a force of nature. Yet, as I grew older, I realized that my understanding of her was incomplete. Her love, like all love, contained depths that I could never fully fathom.

This chapter invites you to sit with your questions, to resist the urge for closure, and to embrace the beauty of not knowing. In love, as in life, it is the unanswered questions that keep us searching, growing, and connecting. The difference between the who and the what may separate the heart, but it is also what gives the heart its capacity to love.

17

The ideal of a father is often painted in broad, aspirational strokes: a strong protector, a steady provider, a moral compass. But the reality, as I've come to understand through my own experiences, is far more nuanced. My journey with the father figures in my life—my biological father, my stepfather, and the composite of fathers I found in the pages of philosophy books—has been marked by contradictions, disappointments, and, ultimately, a deeper understanding of humanity's imperfections.

My father, Jose Franco Sr., was more of a shadow than a presence in my life. Born in Puerto Rico, he met my mother, Maritza, in 1964 under unexpected circumstances. My grandmother had been in a car accident, and my uncle's friend, Jose, visited her in the hospital. There, he met my mother, who had traveled from the Dominican Republic to help with her recovery. They fell in love quickly, marrying within a year.

For a time, my father seemed to embody the qualities of a good partner and father. But the inheritance he received from his family shifted his trajectory. Instead of using the money to build stability, he quit his job and succumbed to the temptations of alcohol and late nights. When my mother left him for good in 1967, she carried not only my

brother, who was 8 months old at the time, but also me, then six months away from being born.

Despite my mother's refusal to badmouth him, the stories she and my brother shared painted a grim picture. He was physically abusive, and his behavior was erratic. These stories shaped my perception of him long before I met him as a boy of 13 during a baseball tournament in Puerto Rico. The meeting was brief, and though he seemed kind, his absence from my daily life spoke louder than his words.

If my biological father's absence was marked by silence, my stepfather's presence, after a two year good guy facade was defined by noise. He entered our lives when I was young, a man whose flaws were magnified by his struggles with alcohol. Every night, I waited in fear for him to come home drunk. Though he never hit us, his verbal abuse towards my mother and his obnoxious, loud music made our home feel like anything but a sanctuary.

My mother and brother seemed to have developed a tolerance for his behavior, but I couldn't ignore it. I internalized the chaos, my sensitivity amplifying my sense of insecurity. Over time, my mother became a functional alcoholic herself—a change I blamed entirely on my stepfather. It was easier to direct my anger at him than to confront the possibility that my mother, too, was flawed.

My mother was the bedrock of our family, a woman who worked tirelessly to provide for us. She had left my father for our safety, moved to New York City, and taken on the

grueling work of a seamstress in the garment district. But her strength was not without its cracks. Her gradual dependence on alcohol was a coping mechanism for the stress and isolation she endured. As a child, I couldn't see this. I saw only her strength and sacrifice, and I wanted to preserve that image at all costs—even if it meant ignoring the parts of her that were struggling.

It wasn't until much later, as I began studying sociology and philosophy, that I could reconcile my mother's humanity with her heroism. The concept of self-fulfilling prophecy helped me understand how the narratives we construct about ourselves and others can shape reality. For years, I had cast my mother as infallible, my stepfather as the villain, and myself as powerless. But this narrative was incomplete. My mother's flaws did not diminish her love for us; my stepfather's struggles did not erase his humanity; and my own agency was greater than I had allowed myself to believe.

In the absence of a traditional father figure, I turned to philosophy. The works of Viktor Frankl, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Marcus Aurelius became my guides, offering wisdom and perspective that helped me navigate the complexities of my relationships and my identity.

Frankl's notion of agency, rooted in his experiences during the Holocaust, was particularly transformative. He wrote in Man's Search for Meaning: "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." These words gave me a sense of control in a

life that often felt dictated by external forces. They reminded me that, even in the face of trauma and dysfunction, I had the power to choose how I responded.

But this sense of agency was complicated by the insights of Bessel van der Kolk, whose work on trauma revealed how deeply our past experiences can shape our present behavior. His book The Body Keeps the Score taught me that some reactions are hardwired by our neurological pathways, making conscious choice more difficult. This tension between freedom and determinism became a central theme in my journey of self-discovery.

The gap between the ideal father and the reality of my experiences has been a source of both pain and growth. As a boy, I longed for a father who would protect and guide me, who would embody the strength and kindness I needed. Instead, I found fragments of that ideal in unexpected places: in my mother's resilience, in the philosophical texts I devoured, and in the mentors who entered my life at crucial moments.

When my father passed away in 2014, I was surprised by the depth of my grief. Despite his absence and flaws, there was a connection—a shared name, a shared history, and the unspoken hope that things could have been different. His death forced me to confront my own expectations and disappointments, to accept that the ideal father I had constructed in my mind was never going to align with reality. And that was okay.

As a father myself, I am acutely aware of the paradoxes inherent in the role. I strive to be a source of strength and guidance for my daughter, but I also know that I am flawed. The challenge lies in balancing authority with warmth, discipline with empathy, and protection with the freedom to explore. It is a delicate dance, one that requires constant reflection and adjustment.

Through my journey, I have learned to extend the same compassion to myself that I have tried to extend to my parents and stepfather. Their imperfections do not define them, just as mine do not define me. We are all works in progress, shaped by our choices and circumstances, striving to do the best we can with what we have.

In many ways, my father figures have become a composite: a blend of my biological father's charm, my stepfather's struggles, my mother's resilience, and the wisdom of the philosophers who adopted me through their writings. This composite has taught me that fatherhood is not about perfection; it is about presence, effort, and the willingness to grow.

Even now, I continue to receive fatherly advice from the most surprising and unexpected places. One of the benefits of keeping an open heart and mind is that people wiser than me often recognize the sincerity of my intentions, even in a world that resists fairness. This openness brought me an unlikely mentor during a conversation with a parent from the baseball team I coached.

He wasn't having a good day, and I could sense the weight of whatever was on his mind. Wanting to avoid adding to the negative energy, I steered the conversation into philosophical territory, sharing quotes from the thinkers who had guided me. It was a habit I'd developed—philosophy as a bridge when words seemed insufficient. To my surprise, this father, someone with the polished veneer of privilege—having attended a prestigious boarding school in Rhode Island, Ivy League University and being married to a college professor with a doctorate—revealed something profoundly personal. He admitted that he was a recovering heroin addict and then introduced me to the works of William James.

In that moment, I was humbled. The polished surface of his life belied the struggles he had faced, and yet here he was, sharing wisdom born of pain and redemption. Through him, I discovered William James and found lessons far beyond what my birth father ever taught me.

As I continue to navigate the complexities of my own life, I carry these lessons with me. They remind me to approach my relationships with openness and humility, to embrace the paradoxes of love and responsibility, and to find strength in the spaces between the ideal and the real.

18

Life at Stoop Juice gave me a place to think deeply about human resilience and the ways we navigate adversity. But it also became a testing ground for my own growth, a space where I could wrestle with my values, question my assumptions, and redefine my purpose. It was here that I met the Iron Man inside me—not a superhero, but a mindset forged through discipline, curiosity, and relentless self-confrontation.

The idea of an Iron Man wasn't about physical strength or bravado. It was about creating a mindset capable of withstanding life's toughest challenges. Like iron, it wasn't something you were born with—it was built, one layer at a time, under heat and pressure. My first introduction to this concept came during my weight loss journey in 2011. Losing 70 pounds in 120 days taught me the power of ownership over my choices. For years, I'd let external circumstances dictate my actions. During those four months, I aligned my habits with a vision of who I wanted to be. It was the first time I felt like I was in control of my life.

At Stoop Juice, this lesson took on new dimensions. Running a small business wasn't just about managing finances or maintaining consistency; it demanded emotional discipline. On days when rejection, self-doubt,

or exhaustion weighed me down, I had to summon the Iron Man within to keep moving forward.

My perspective deepened when I revisited Marcus Aurelius' Meditations. His words, "You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength," became my mantra. But over time, I realized this Iron Man mindset wasn't just about endurance—it was about curiosity, especially intellectual curiosity.

I began to approach intellectual challenges the same way I approached personal ones: by seeking out the strongest counterarguments to my beliefs. This became my second Iron Man: the one who confronts the most robust perspectives of an opponent, not to win, but to learn. I found that the stronger the opposition's argument, the more I learned about my own gaps in understanding. This process wasn't about ego; it was about growth.

One day, a regular customer, Jerome, a retired Marine, dropped a piece of advice that reframed my understanding of discipline. "Discipline isn't about denying yourself," he said. "It's about committing to the things that matter most. When you know your why, the how takes care of itself." Jerome's words echoed Viktor Frankl's philosophy about the transformative power of meaning in suffering. For me, the why wasn't about proving anything to others—it was about aligning my actions with my conscience.

This shift in perspective inspired me to incorporate small, consistent practices into my daily life. I continued to journal, writing down three things I wanted to accomplish everyday, no matter how small. At night, I reflected on what

I'd done well and where I could improve. This routine kept me grounded.

The Iron Man inside wasn't just about resilience or curiosity—it was about practicing what I valued, even when no one was watching, what I refer to as "quiet unseen moments." I saw this concept in action during one particularly tough day at Stoop Juice. A supplier failed to deliver key ingredients, leaving me scrambling. Instead of giving in to frustration, I asked myself, "What can I control here?" That question led me to a local market, where I sourced just enough to keep us running for the day. It wasn't ideal, but it was a reminder that resilience isn't about avoiding problems—it's about adapting to them.

Over time, I saw parallels between my personal growth and the struggles of customers like Jimmy, a young man I helped during a tutoring session. Frustrated with his math skills, he exclaimed, "I'm just not good at this." I shared my own struggles with self-doubt, explaining how challenges were opportunities to grow. "It's not about being good right away," I told him. "It's about showing up and trying, even when it's hard." Watching him pick up his pencil again reminded me of my own journey—small but significant steps toward resilience.

As I reflected on these experiences, I realized that my Iron Man was not just about withstanding adversity—it was also about seeking it out, intellectually and emotionally. By challenging myself to face opposing viewpoints and uncomfortable truths, I deepened my understanding of myself and the world around me.

The juice bar wasn't just a business; it became a training ground for this dual Iron Man perspective—one focused on enduring hardship and the other on intellectual growth. Each challenge strengthened my resolve and taught me what it meant to live with purpose. In embracing this mindset, I discovered not just resilience but a profound sense of freedom and peace, knowing that every challenge, whether personal or intellectual, was an opportunity to grow.

In the end, the Iron Man isn't a destination—it's a way of being. And it's a commitment I continue to make, one decision, one challenge, one lesson at a time.

19

The moments that shape us often arrive uninvited, leaving imprints that linger long after the event has passed. For me, the raw realities of life in the Bronx and Washington Heights were relentless teachers, forcing me to confront truths that could not be softened by idealism. These moments, stark and unfiltered, demanded that I face the world as it was, and much later, during the slow hours at Stoop Juice, I began to unpack their meaning with the help of philosophy.

I was 20 years old when I witnessed a man fall to his death from a fifth-floor fire escape. He landed eight feet from where I stood, the sound of his body hitting the ground forever etched in my memory. Later, I learned he had been trying to flee a push-in robbery at the home of a suspected drug dealer. At the time, I didn't have the tools to process the event beyond shock and fear. It wasn't until years later, while reflecting during quiet moments at Stoop Juice, that I began to ask deeper questions about the fragility of life and the desperation that drives people to take such risks.

During one such reflection, Viktor Frankl's words from Man's Search for Meaning came to mind: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to

change ourselves." Frankl's insights illuminated the power of choice in the face of suffering. The man on the fire escape was making a desperate choice, shaped by circumstances I couldn't fully understand but could empathize with. His story became a lens through which I examined the precariousness of human existence.

Growing up, I admired two Boy Georges. The first was the musician, whose songs offered an escape into a world of rhythm and color. The second was a drug-dealing entrepreneurial prodigy whose heroin empire created daily lines of addicts on Townsend Avenue. Addicts who dumped their empty heroin bags stamped "Obsession" everywhere in a 10 block radius.

In David Durk's book "The Pleasant Avenue Connection" I learned about the heroin network that controlled over 90% of all the dope entering the US in the 1950s and 1960s. At age 22, I began to understand the full scope and structure of the system. The layered, multicultural involvement in the trade back then bore a striking resemblance to what I witnessed growing up—organized chaos with a strange sense of order beneath the surface.

The Italian-American bosses of Pleasant Avenue, like Gennaro Zanfardino and Herbie Sperling, ran their operations with the precision of corporate executives. They controlled East Harlem's heroin supply, operating from their social club headquarters with a strict hierarchy. The heavy lifting, however, was often delegated to young

neighborhood runners who carried all the risk while the bosses stayed insulated.

Meanwhile, Puerto Rican and Cuban networks were carving out their own roles in the ecosystem. They handled smaller operations, moving product across the Bronx and New Jersey. These groups operated like well-oiled machines, blending their efforts with other immigrant communities to maintain a steady flow of heroin. They weren't working in isolation but as part of a decentralized yet interconnected system, each group relying on its strengths to keep the larger operation running.

I saw echoes of this structure in Boy George's empire. While set against the backdrop of the Bronx in the 1980s—his disciplined approach and strategic organization mirrored the efficiency of the Pleasant Avenue network. Both relied on their environments, their connections, and their ability to stay one step ahead of authorities. It wasn't just about brute force or street-level intimidation; it was about systems, logistics, and calculated moves.

What struck me most was how these operations functioned like businesses, albeit ones rooted in destruction. It's easy to write off the drug trade as chaos, but there's a managerial skill at play—one that's tragically misapplied. Reflecting on this, I see how Boy George and the Pleasant Avenue bosses built something methodical and structured, but at a cost no community could afford.

My mother showed me a different way. She hustled, too, but her hustle was honest. Whether she was organizing her sociedades or sewing late into the night to make ends

meet, she demonstrated that discipline and ambition didn't have to come at the expense of integrity. I know how easily it could've been different. Without her example, I might have seen Boy George's path as a viable one, mistaking his efficiency for something admirable, instead of a cautionary tale.

It's easy to dehumanize figures like Boy George, to paint them as villains without nuance. But in him, I saw a reflection of what ambition looks like when it's misdirected —a reminder of how crucial it is to have the right guidance and values. In a different life, with a different mother, I could have been someone else entirely. And that thought humbles me every day.

At age 11, I witnessed the real face of addiction—not the caricatures on TV, but real people who could have been anyone's relatives. Among those frequent faces on the dope line were two of my future high school teachers, authority figures in the classroom who, outside, revealed a darker struggle.

As I stood behind the counter at Stoop Juice years later, I often revisited those memories. The duality I observed in those teachers was jarring. How could someone command respect in one setting while battling such a consuming addiction in another? It was Friedrich Nietzsche who provided a framework for understanding these contradictions. He wrote, "Man is the cruelest animal," pointing to our capacity for both greatness and self-destruction. Addiction, I realized, was not a moral failing but a manifestation of pain, and understanding this duality was key to finding compassion.

By the time I was 22, Washington Heights (where during the summer, my friends and I would walk to High Bridge pool) was a community under siege. Crime and violence escalated as the area became a hub for the drug trade. Randy, my friend and former baseball teammate, called me one evening from Washington state, urging me to visit. He was worried about my safety and my future. "You need to get out of there," he said. I declined, tied to the familiarity of my environment despite its dangers.

The statistics from that time still haunt me. In 1990, the 34th Precinct reported over 10,000 crimes, including 103 murders. Nineteen of the victims were young men who had once played baseball with Randy and me. Their deaths were not just numbers; they were personal losses, reminders of how quickly lives could be extinguished.

One night, after a post-baseball game gathering, police raided the apartment of a friend of a friend, Max. They found weapons, money, and drugs, arresting everyone present. Though I wasn't there that night, the incident left me paranoid. On my next visit to Max's apartment, he patted me down to ensure I wasn't wearing a wire. The casual distrust and pervasive fear were suffocating. Eventually, I stopped spending time uptown and began seeking refuge in the Village, losing myself in its anonymity.

Years later, as I brewed smoothies and cleaned counters at Stoop Juice, I reflected on those days with a mix of relief and regret. It was during these quiet moments that I encountered Bessel van der Kolk's book "The Body Keeps

the Score". His insights into trauma offered a new perspective on the paranoia and fear that had shaped my choices. Van der Kolk explained how trauma embeds itself in the body, influencing reactions long after the events that caused it. His work helped me understand that my isolation during those years wasn't just a choice—it was a survival mechanism.

During the Christmas season of 1990, I latched onto the New York Giants' playoff run. Their journey to Super Bowl XXV became a rare source of joy and distraction. On January 27, 1991, the Giants narrowly defeated the Buffalo Bills 20-19, clinching the championship. I celebrated their victory with uncharacteristic enthusiasm, savoring a moment of triumph in a time overshadowed by uncertainty.

But joy was fleeting. That same day, Randy and two other young men died in a car crash. His death hit me like a tidal wave, pulling me under a current of grief and regret. I cried, cursed, and walked aimlessly through the city, trying to make sense of a world that seemed senseless. Randy's absence left a void I would carry for years.

The realities I had witnessed—the man falling to his death, the heroin lines on Townsend Avenue, the murders of friends, the dual lives of my teachers, and Randy's untimely death—formed a mosaic of human experience. These moments were raw and unfiltered, forcing me to confront the darker facets of existence. But they also served as a catalyst for introspection.

At Stoop Juice, I often revisited these experiences, trying to make sense of them through the lens of

philosophy. Nietzsche's assertion that "to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering" resonated deeply. The suffering I had witnessed and endured was not without purpose; it was a teacher, guiding me toward resilience and compassion.

As I continued reflecting, Viktor Frankl's concept of finding meaning in suffering became a cornerstone of my understanding. He wrote, "What is to give light must endure burning." This idea reframed my experiences, showing me that the pain and loss I had endured were not just obstacles but opportunities for growth. They were the fire that forged resilience.

The realities of my youth taught me that life is not black and white. It is a spectrum of experiences, each one shaped by a complex interplay of choices, circumstances, and systemic forces. This understanding has been both humbling and empowering. It has allowed me to approach life with greater empathy, to recognize the humanity in others, and to find strength in the face of uncertainty.

As I stood behind the counter at Stoop Juice, blending smoothies for customers and reflecting on the past, I realized that the lessons from those years were not just about survival—they were about transformation. The experiences I once saw as burdens had become the foundation of my growth.

This chapter, titled "Real," is a reminder that life's most profound lessons often come from its harshest realities. These experiences have been painful, but they have also been transformative, shaping me into the person I am

today. They have taught me to confront the world as it is, to find meaning in the midst of struggle, and to embrace the messy, beautiful reality of being human.

Randy

20

When I think about Randy Rivera, the ache comes in waves. His laugh, sharp and genuine, echoes in my memory as clearly as the sound of a ball hitting a glove. Randy was more than my best friend; he was my anchor when the world felt too heavy. His home became my refuge during the winters and the summers, a sanctuary during Randy's college breaks where his parents treated me like one of their own. Randy's father, a towering figure of calm and strength, offered me a sense of safety that my own home couldn't provide. Yet, it was Randy's death that forced me to confront the deeper questions of life, loss, and meaning.

Randy's family had already endured more tragedy than most could fathom. Five years before his death, his older brother died in a motorcycle accident while serving in the U.S. Air Force. His mother's Alzheimer's diagnosis and rapid decline left a void in the household, one that Randy and his father bore with quiet resilience. His only surviving brother, born with a tumor in his head, was fortunate to find steady employment at the same hospital where Randy's father worked as an orderly. Even beyond his immediate family, the weight of loss loomed large—Randy's cousin was the first woman police officer killed in the line of duty in New

York City. These events painted a portrait of a family tested by relentless hardship yet bound by an enduring strength.

Randy's journey was nothing short of inspiring. Recruited to play baseball at Oklahoma State University, he shared a field with future MLB baseball players Robin Ventura and Jeremy Burnitz. His success wasn't accidental; it was born from visualization and relentless effort. "If the guys I've pitched against made it to the big leagues, some team will notice me, too," he would say, his conviction unwavering. And he was right. The Seattle Mariners signed him in 1990, a testament to his talent and perseverance. Yet, the world has a cruel way of reminding us that no amount of success can shield us from life's unpredictability.

When Randy passed, I was shattered. At first, I clung to his memory as a way to keep him alive, framing my life through what I thought he would have wanted for me. That narrative gave me the strength to leave the city and attend Binghamton University. It became my anchor, a story I told myself to survive. But years later, behind the counter at Stoop Juice, I began to see how much of my grief was still unresolved. The stories we tell ourselves, like the ones in Yann Martel's Life of Pi, can be a lifeline. But they are not the truth—they are a version of it, crafted to help us endure.

In Life of Pi, the protagonist tells two stories of survival—one filled with wonder and animals, the other a stark tale of human brutality. The first is a fantastical narrative where a young boy survives a shipwreck on a lifeboat with a tiger, zebra, and orangutan. The second reveals the cold, brutal reality: he survives by descending into primal savagery, enduring unimaginable horrors. The beauty of the tiger,

Richard Parker, becomes a metaphor for Pi's ability to compartmentalize and subliminate the trauma of cannibalism and loss. Both stories lead to the same conclusion, but it's the fantastical version that provides solace. The animals offer distance, an imaginative barrier between him and the painful truth.

Like Pi, I realized that my narrative about Randy's life and death was a form of sublimation, a way to take the raw, unbearable reality and turn it into something I could live with. Yet, there comes a point where you must confront the shadow of the unvarnished truth. Michael Singer said, "Death is the best teacher," and Randy's passing taught me that survival is only the beginning. Growth comes when you're ready to face the lessons beneath the surface.

Processing his passing wasn't a linear journey. It was a labyrinth, one that led me to philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Grief, I learned, often exists in the silence between words, in the spaces where language fails. It is in those silent spaces that we find the echoes of the stories we've told ourselves and begin to question their accuracy.

Carl Jung's concept of the shadow self also came to the forefront during this time. Randy's death forced me to confront parts of myself I had avoided—my fear of vulnerability, my resistance to asking for help, my need to project strength. Jung believed that integrating these shadows is essential for personal growth, and in Randy's absence, I began to see the light these shadows concealed. The shadow was not just grief but the denial of

it, the refusal to acknowledge how much I had buried to keep moving forward.

Reflecting on Marcel Proust's belief that "the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes," I started to reinterpret my memories of Randy. His resilience, his ability to visualize success, and his unwavering belief in himself became lessons I carried forward. But this reinterpretation required me to let go of the comforting narrative I had built. William James's philosophy of pragmatism also shaped my understanding of loss. James argued that the value of any belief lies in its practical consequences. For me, this meant asking whether the story I told myself about Randy was helping me grow or keeping me stuck. Was I honoring his memory, or was I using it as a shield to avoid confronting my own vulnerability?

One of the most vivid memories I have of Randy is a conversation we had about visualization. "Jose," he said, "you've got to see yourself winning before anyone else does. That's how you make it real." His words stuck with me, not just in the context of baseball but in life. Randy didn't just dream; he acted. He worked tirelessly, combining visualization with action, a lesson that has stayed with me in every endeavor. Yet, in my grief, I had clung to this memory as a way to avoid asking myself what I truly wanted from life beyond his vision for me.

Yet, there were moments when our friendship was tested. One such time was when his mother, struggling with Alzheimer's, made me two breakfasts in a row. I knew her condition, yet I let her cook for me twice, laughing

quietly in the background. Randy walked in, upset, his love for his mother evident in his frustration. Another time, he found pictures of another woman in his father's pocket. Instead of offering comfort, I joked insensitively. Randy called me a fool, and though we made up, those moments remind me of how often I fell short as a friend. These memories, uncomfortable as they are, became part of the story I had to confront. They showed me that my grief wasn't just for Randy but for the person I had been when he was alive—a person I wasn't sure I could still claim.

Grief has a way of bringing clarity, and Randy's death clarified my priorities. It became the catalyst for me to reevaluate how I was living—not just in grand gestures but in the small, everyday choices that shape a life. Leaving the city to attend Binghamton University was one such decision, driven by the belief that Randy would have wanted me to pursue more. Later, at Stoop Juice, his memory spurred me to confront the disconnect between my outward ambitions and my inner sense of purpose, leading me to align my actions with the kind of legacy Randy himself embodied. Behind the counter at Stoop Juice, during the quiet moments, I began to reflect on the kind of person I wanted to be. The philosophers I turned to offered insights, but it was Randy's life that provided the most profound lessons. His ability to visualize success, his discipline, and his unwavering belief in himself became a framework for my own growth.

Scientific studies on grief and resilience further illuminated my journey. For example, research published in The Journal of Positive Psychology highlights how post-

traumatic growth can lead to deeper relationships, greater appreciation for life, and a stronger sense of purpose. Additionally, a study from the Journal of Traumatic Stress examined how individuals who actively process their grief through reflective practices often demonstrate greater emotional adaptability. These findings validated what I was beginning to experience—that even in profound loss, there lies an opportunity for growth.

In many ways, Randy's memory is a bridge through the shadows of my own life. His life and death taught me that resilience isn't about avoiding pain but embracing it, learning from it, and using it as a stepping stone. Like the stories in Life of Pi, the narratives we craft can help us survive, but true growth comes from questioning those stories and seeking the deeper truths they conceal. Randy's voice, his laugh, and his lessons remain with me, a constant reminder that even in loss, there is light. It makes me wonder: how do we take that light and use it to illuminate the paths of others? Can the lessons we learn through grief become a guide for those who feel lost in their own shadows?

21

Stoop Juice had become more than just a juice bar; it was a space where conversations flourished, where questions lingered, and where bridges between seemingly disparate worlds began to take shape. The space was more than its four walls; it became a reflection of the complexity and contradictions that had defined my life. As I continued to grow personally and professionally, I found myself meditating on the connections I had built—the ones that spanned from the Bronx to Brooklyn, from the stoops to the juice bar counter.

The Bronx had been a world of raw survival, where resilience was forged under pressure and connection often meant shared struggles. It had given me a foundation of toughness and community, but it had also left me grappling with questions: How much of our lives are shaped by the systems around us? And how much is within our control to change?

One day at the juice bar, a conversation sparked that would make me confront these questions again. Ms. Clara, a retired teacher and one of our regulars, walked in with her tote bag filled with books and newspapers. She had a sharp mind and a curious demeanor, and our conversations often veered into the philosophical.

The Seattle Times

Mariner Minor-Leaguer Killed In Crash

AP

Funeral services will be held tomorrow for a Seattle Mariners pitcher who died in a car accident near Oklahoma City.

Righthander Randy Rivera, 23, a graduate of Oklahoma State who pitched last season at Bellingham in the Northwest League and with Peninsula in the Carolina League, died early Sunday, the Mariners said yesterday.

Also killed in the accident were passengers Wade Kubon, 20, of Oklahoma City and Jeremy Thompson, 17, of El Reno, Okla.

The Oklahoma Highway Patrol said the accident occurred when the car in which the three were traveling hit a guardrail and then a bridge pier on Interstate 40 west of Oklahoma City.

Rivera, a New York City native, helped lead Oklahoma State to the College World Series last year, where it lost to Georgia. He was signed by the Mariners as a free agent in June, right out of college.

In three games with Class A Bellingham, Rivera pitched six innings, gave up two hits and no runs, struck out six and walked one, with one save.

With AA Peninsula, Rivera was 5-3, with a 3.17 ERA, in 17 appearances. He gave up 54 hits in 61 1/3 innings, striking out 37 and walking 25.

This winter he played at San Juan for the Puerto Rican League, posting a 4-3, record, with a 3.65 ERA, in 13 appearances. The team completed its season Friday.

Funeral services will be held in San Juan, Puerto

As she waited for her usual green juice, she opened a copy of The New York Times and pointed to an article about gentrification. "They keep calling it progress," she said, her voice tinged with frustration. "But who gets to decide what progress looks like? Who benefits from it, and who gets left behind?"

Her question hit me like a wave. Brooklyn—the borough where I had built my life and my business—was a symbol of that very tension. The rising rents, the influx of wealthier residents, the transformation of neighborhoods that once felt untouchable—it was all progress to some, displacement to others. Stoop Juice itself was part of this narrative, a small business thriving in a neighborhood that was changing by the day.

I thought about the bridges I had crossed in my own life. Growing up in the Bronx, I had learned to navigate the dualities of survival and ambition, of belonging and exclusion. At Binghamton, I had wrestled with the tension between my roots and the opportunities education had opened up for me. And now, at Stoop Juice, I was grappling with the role I played in a community that was both welcoming and transforming.

These bridges weren't just metaphors; they were real connections that required care and attention. They reminded me that progress isn't linear, that it often comes with costs and contradictions. As I engaged with my customers and my community, I began to see the juice bar as a space where these tensions could be explored, where stories could be shared, and where the messy, complex nature of progress could be acknowledged.

One afternoon, Reggie, a young bike messenger and regular customer, came in looking more exhausted than usual. Reggie was one of those people who seemed to embody the hustle of the city. He was always on the move, always juggling multiple jobs, always chasing the next opportunity.

"You good?" I asked as I handed him his usual acai bowl.

He sighed, leaning against the counter. "Man, it feels like I'm doing all this work just to stay in the same place. Rent keeps going up, bills keep piling up. Feels like no matter how hard I try, I can't get ahead."

His words echoed something I had read in Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century, a book that had shaped much of my understanding of systemic inequality. Piketty argued that economic systems are designed to concentrate wealth over time, making it harder for those without capital to break free from cycles of poverty. Reggie's struggle wasn't just personal; it was systemic. He was running a race on a treadmill, working tirelessly but unable to move forward.

But Reggie's story also reminded me of Walter Block's libertarian perspective, which emphasized personal responsibility and free markets as solutions to inequality. Block might argue that Reggie's hustle was a sign of his agency, of his ability to navigate a challenging system through determination and creativity. And while I admired Reggie's resilience, I couldn't ignore the systemic barriers that made his path so arduous.

These conflicting perspectives mirrored the dualities I saw in my own life. On one hand, I believed deeply in personal responsibility—in the power of discipline and mindset to create change. On the other hand, I couldn't ignore the structural forces that shaped our opportunities and our choices. It wasn't an either-or; it was a both-and, a complex interplay of individual agency and systemic constraints.

One evening, after closing up the juice bar, I sat down with my journal to reflect on these tensions. I wrote about Reggie, about Ms. Clara's question, about the bridges I had crossed and the ones I was still building. I thought about the role of small businesses like mine in shaping neighborhoods, about the responsibility I had to my community, about the ways I could use my platform to create connections rather than divisions.

I also thought about the kids I worked with at Youth Service, many of whom reminded me of my younger self. Jimmy, in particular, had been asking tough questions lately—about wealth, about success, about what it meant to live a good life. During one of our sessions, he had asked me point-blank: "Do you think it's worth it? Leaving the Bronx, starting over, trying to make something of yourself?"

His question stopped me in my tracks. I thought about the bridges I had crossed, the sacrifices I had made, the moments of doubt and triumph. "I think it's worth it if you stay true to who you are," I said finally. "But it's not about leaving or staying. It's about building a life that reflects your values, no matter where you are."

Jimmy nodded thoughtfully, his gaze distant. "But how do you know what your values are?"

It was a question I had wrestled with for years, one that I was still answering in my own life. "You figure it out as you go," I told him. "By paying attention to what matters to you, to what makes you feel alive. And by being willing to ask hard questions, even when the answers aren't clear."

As I left the baseball field that afternoon, I thought about Jimmy's question and how it tied back to the bridges between worlds. Our values, I realized, weren't just personal; they were shaped by the connections we built, the stories we shared, the ways we engaged with the world around us. They were the threads that held the bridges together, the foundation that allowed us to navigate complexity with grace and integrity.

Back at Stoop Juice, I began to see the juice bar as a bridge in its own right—a space where different worlds could meet, where conversations could spark change, where the messy, beautiful work of community could unfold. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't always easy, but it was a place where progress could take root, one connection at a time.

In the end, the bridges between worlds weren't just about crossing from one side to the other. They were about creating spaces where we could stand together, where we could acknowledge our differences and our shared humanity, where we could build something stronger than the divides that threatened to pull us apart. And in that work, I found a sense of purpose that had eluded me for much of my life—a purpose rooted not in answers, but in

the courage to keep asking questions, to keep building bridges, to keep believing in the power of connection.

22

Running Stoop Juice had taught me that progress is never a straight line. It zigzags, it loops back on itself, and sometimes it feels like you're standing still. The juice bar had become a living metaphor for this paradox—a place where the tensions between change and continuity played out every day. It was a constant reminder that progress, both personal and societal, often comes with contradictions that we have to navigate rather than resolve.

One of the most striking examples of this paradox came from the conversations I had with my customers. Take Mario, for instance. Mario was a young tech entrepreneur who had recently moved into the neighborhood. He was full of enthusiasm for the changes happening in Brooklyn, seeing them as signs of progress. "This area has so much potential," he said one day as he ordered a matcha latte. "It's exciting to be part of something that's growing and evolving."

At the same time, there was Rosa, a lifelong resident and one of my most loyal customers. Rosa saw the same changes Mario did, but her perspective was shaped by years of watching her neighbors being priced out, their lives uprooted by rising rents and shifting demographics. "They call it progress," she said, her voice heavy with

frustration. "But progress for who? It's not progress if it means losing what makes a place special."

These two perspectives weren't just about gentrification; they were about the larger question of who gets to define progress. Mario and Rosa weren't enemies—they were participants in the same story, grappling with its complexities from different vantage points. Their conversations with me, and sometimes with each other, highlighted the need for empathy and understanding in navigating these changes.

I often thought about these tensions in the context of my own life. Growing up in the Bronx, I had seen progress in its most raw and personal form. For my mother, progress was putting food on the table and keeping a roof over our heads. For the corner boys, it was finding ways to survive another day. For me, it was getting out, building a life that felt bigger than the block. But as I built that life, I began to see that progress wasn't just about leaving—it was about staying connected to where I came from, about finding ways to give back without losing myself in the process.

This realization became particularly clear during a visit to the Bronx. I had gone back for a nostalgic drive, to reconnect with the place that had shaped me. Driving down Townsend Avenue, I was struck by how much had changed—and how much hadn't. The stoops were still there, but the faces were different. The bodega where I used to buy snacks as a kid had been replaced by another bodega. The school yard where we used to play was now filled with two annex buildings.

I stopped by the community center where my friend had once volunteered and he invited me to talk, hoping to catch up with some of the kids. Carlos, now a teenager, was there, talking with his friends. When he saw me, his face lit up with a mix of surprise and excitement. "Yo, Mr. Franco! You came back!"

We sat on the bleachers and talked, catching up on everything that had happened since my last visit. Jimmy told me about his dreams of becoming a graphic designer, about the challenges he faced at school, about the ways he was trying to stay focused despite the distractions around him. His determination reminded me of myself at his age, full of questions and doubts but also full of hope.

As we talked, I asked Jimmy what progress meant to him. He thought for a moment before answering. "I guess it's about having options," he said. "Like, not feeling stuck. Being able to choose what you want to do, where you want to go."

His answer stayed with me as I returned to Brooklyn. Progress as freedom, as the ability to choose—that was a definition that resonated deeply with me. It wasn't about erasing the past or ignoring the challenges of the present. It was about creating space for possibility, for growth, for transformation.

But creating that space wasn't easy. It required confronting the contradictions and complexities that came with change. At Stoop Juice, those contradictions were everywhere. The juice bar itself was a symbol of gentrification, a place that catered to both long-time residents like Rosa and newcomers like Mario. Navigating

that tension wasn't just a business challenge; it was a moral one.

One evening, as I was closing up, I found myself reflecting on a passage from The Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire. Freire wrote about the importance of dialogue in creating meaningful change, about the need to engage with others in ways that acknowledge their humanity and their perspectives. "Dialogue cannot exist without humility," he wrote. "The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance."

Freire's words reminded me that progress isn't something you impose; it's something you co-create. It's about listening as much as it is about acting, about being willing to question your own assumptions and biases. It's about recognizing that the bridges between worlds aren't just physical—they're emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

This idea was reinforced during a workshop at a small business owners breakfast. I had been invited to speak to a group of young entrepreneurs, sharing my experiences of building and running Stoop Juice. These kids were eager, full of energy and ideas, but also full of doubts about whether they could succeed in a system that often seemed stacked against them.

One boy, Javier, asked me a question that cut straight to the heart of the matter. "How do you know if what you're doing is really making a difference?"

His question stopped me in my tracks. How did I know? Was Stoop Juice just another business, or was it something more? Was I contributing to the very problems I wanted to

solve, or was I creating a space for change? The truth was, I didn't have a definitive answer. But I shared what I did know.

"I think making a difference isn't about having all the answers," I told him. "It's about being willing to ask the questions and to keep asking them, even when it's uncomfortable. It's about showing up, listening, and trying to create something that reflects your values. And it's about being okay with the fact that you won't always get it right."

As I spoke, I realized that this wasn't just advice for Javier—it was advice for myself. The paradox of progress was that it required both humility and conviction, both action and reflection. It required being willing to build bridges, even when you weren't sure what lay on the other side.

That night, as I wrote in my journal, I thought about the bridges I had crossed and the ones I was still building. I thought about the contradictions I had seen in the Bronx and in Brooklyn, about the conversations I had with Rosa and Mario, with Jimmy and Javier. I thought about the ways progress had shaped my own life, about the freedoms it had given me and the responsibilities it had placed on my shoulders.

Progress wasn't perfect, and it wasn't easy. It was messy, complex, and full of paradoxes. But it was also necessary. It was the process of becoming, of reaching for something better while holding onto what mattered most. It was the work of building bridges—not to escape the past, but to carry it forward, to create a future that honored its lessons.

As I closed my journal, I felt a sense of clarity, even amidst the contradictions. Progress wasn't about reaching a destination; it was about the journey, about the questions we asked and the connections we made along the way. And in that journey, I found a sense of purpose—a reminder that even in the face of life's greatest challenges, we have the power to shape our own stories, one step at a time.

23

By the time I began to see the patterns in my life clearly, I realized they had been there all along. The Bronx, Binghamton, and Brooklyn were not isolated chapters—they were threads in a tapestry that had been weaving itself in ways I was only starting to understand. At Stoop Juice, I found myself in a unique position to pull at those threads, to examine how they intersected and intertwined. What emerged was something I hadn't anticipated: the idea that meaningful change—both personal and communal—often begins not with grand gestures but with small, quiet revolutions.

One morning, as I prepared the juice bar for the day, Ms. Clara walked in with her usual tote bag of books and newspapers. She placed her regular order, flipping through the latest headlines. "Do you think real change is even possible?" she asked suddenly, her voice carrying both curiosity and doubt.

Her question was the kind that stayed with me long after she left. Was real change possible? If the world I had grown up in had taught me anything, it was that change rarely came easy. Yet, I had also seen glimmers of transformation—in people like Thomas, who was discovering his potential, and in the conversations happening daily at the juice bar. The question wasn't just

whether change was possible, but what it looked like and how it could be sustained.

I thought about a lesson I had learned from Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning. Frankl wrote that change begins with the individual, with the decision to take responsibility for one's life and to find meaning even in the face of adversity. This idea resonated deeply with me, not just as a personal philosophy but as a framework for understanding the world around me. If systems and structures were slow to change, perhaps the quiet revolution of individual action could be the spark that ignited something larger.

One of the most profound examples of this came from a conversation with Reggie, the bike messenger who often stopped by Stoop Juice. Reggie was in his late twenties, always hustling, always moving. One afternoon, as he waited for his order, he started talking about his dreams.

"I've been thinking about going back to school," he said, almost as if he were testing the idea out loud. "I don't want to be doing this forever, you know? But it feels like such a long shot."

We talked about his fears and doubts, about the barriers he saw and the opportunities he hoped to create. I told him about my own journey, about the challenges I had faced and the lessons I had learned. "It's not about having all the answers," I said. "It's about taking the first step, even when you're not sure where it will lead."

Reggie nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Maybe it's time," he said quietly. "Maybe it's time to try."

In that moment, I saw the power of the quiet revolution —the courage to take a single step, to challenge the narratives that told us what we could and couldn't do. Reggie's decision wasn't just about him; it was about the ripple effects it could have on the people around him, the inspiration it could provide to others who were watching.

But the quiet revolution wasn't just about individuals. It was also about the spaces we created and the connections we nurtured. At Stoop Juice, I began to see the juice bar as more than a business. It was a community hub, a place where people could come together to share ideas, to challenge assumptions, to build something larger than themselves.

One evening, I hosted a discussion at the juice bar on the topic of resilience. The room was filled with a mix of customers, neighbors, and friends, all eager to share their stories and perspectives. Thomas, a boy who reminded me of Jimmy was there, sitting next to Ms. Clara, who had brought her well-worn copy of The New York Times. Reggie was in the corner, listening intently as a young woman talked about her experience navigating the foster care system.

As the discussion unfolded, I was struck by the diversity of voices in the room. Each person brought their own experiences, their own struggles and triumphs. Yet, there was a common thread: the belief that resilience wasn't just about enduring hardship—it was about finding meaning and purpose in the face of it.

Thomas spoke about his dream of becoming a graphic designer, about how he was learning to see obstacles as

opportunities to grow. Ms. Clara shared her reflections on decades of teaching in underfunded schools, about the small victories that had kept her going. Reggie talked about his decision to go back to school, about the fears he was learning to confront. I also added to the on going stories I shared at Stoop Juice.

By the end of the evening, the room was buzzing with energy and connection. It was a reminder that the quiet revolution wasn't just about individual action—it was about collective momentum. It was about creating spaces where people could come together to support each other, to challenge each other, to imagine new possibilities.

In the weeks that followed, I began to think more deeply about the role of spaces like Stoop Juice in fostering change. I thought about Paulo Freire's concept of dialogue, about the importance of creating environments where people could engage in meaningful conversations. "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world," Freire wrote. At Stoop Juice, I saw this encounter happening every day—in the conversations between customers, in the questions they asked, in the connections they made.

But the quiet revolution wasn't without its challenges. Progress, as I had learned, was rarely linear. There were setbacks and frustrations, moments of doubt and uncertainty. One afternoon, I found myself talking to Rosa, a long-time resident of the neighborhood, about the changes happening around us.

"It feels like we're losing something," she said, her voice heavy with sadness. "The neighborhood isn't the same anymore. It's like the soul of this place is slipping away."

Her words reminded me of the tension between continuity and change, between preserving what mattered and embracing what was possible. It was a tension I had felt in my own life, as I navigated the bridges between the Bronx, Binghamton, and Brooklyn. It was a tension that required humility, patience, and a willingness to sit with the discomfort of uncertainty.

As I reflected on Rosa's words, I thought about a study I had read in The Journal of Community Psychology that explored the concept of "place attachment." The researchers found that people's connection to their communities was deeply tied to their sense of identity and belonging. When those connections were disrupted—by gentrification, by displacement, by loss—it wasn't just about losing a physical space. It was about losing a part of themselves.

This insight deepened my understanding of the quiet revolution. It wasn't just about creating new possibilities; it was about honoring the past, about building bridges between what was and what could be. It was about recognizing that progress wasn't just about moving forward—it was about carrying the lessons of the past with us, about finding ways to integrate them into the future.

At Stoop Juice, I began to see the juice bar as a microcosm of this work. It was a place where the tensions between continuity and change could be explored, where the quiet revolution could take root. It wasn't about solving

all the problems or answering all the questions. It was about creating a space where people could come together to imagine new possibilities, to challenge old narratives, to build something stronger and more inclusive.

As I closed the juice bar one night, I thought about the journey that had brought me here—the bridges I had crossed, the lessons I had learned, the connections I had built. The quiet revolution wasn't about grand gestures or dramatic transformations. It was about the small, everyday acts of courage and connection that added up to something larger than themselves. It was about the power of questions, the strength of community, and the resilience of the human spirit.

And in that work, I found a sense of purpose that was both humbling and inspiring—a reminder that even in the face of life's greatest challenges, we have the power to create change, one quiet revolution at a time.

24

Throughout my life, I had avoided one thing above all else: looking directly into the mirror of my own soul. It wasn't an intentional avoidance—it was something deeper, more reflexive. Life in the Bronx had conditioned me to keep moving, to stay focused on survival, to push past pain without stopping to examine it. But as the threads of my journey began to weave themselves into a clearer picture, I realized that the only way forward was to confront myself fully, with honesty and courage.

This epiphany didn't come as a single, dramatic moment. It emerged gradually, like the dawn breaking over a city skyline. The catalyst, as with so many of my revelations, came from a conversation at Stoop Juice. Thomas had come by after school, his backpack slung over one shoulder, his expression unusually serious.

"I've been thinking about what you said," he began, setting his bag down at the counter. "About values and figuring out who you are. How do you even start? How do you know what's real and what's just stuff people tell you to believe?"

His question hung in the air, heavy with the weight of its implications. I didn't have an easy answer. I wanted to tell him that it was a process, that it took time and effort, but those words felt insufficient. Instead, I shared a story.

"When I was about your age," I began, "I found an encyclopedia in the garbage. It wasn't anything fancy—just a beat-up old book that someone had thrown away. But when I opened it, it was like a whole new world had opened up to me. I didn't know it at the time, but that book planted a seed. It made me curious about things I'd never thought about before. It made me question the world around me—and myself."

Thomas listened intently, his eyes fixed on mine. "So you just started reading?" he asked.

I nodded. "Reading, questioning, reflecting. It wasn't about finding the answers right away—it was about learning to sit with the questions. To look at myself and ask: What do I really believe? What kind of person do I want to be? And am I living in a way that matches those beliefs?"

As I spoke, I realized I was articulating something I had only recently begun to understand. Self-confrontation wasn't just about asking tough questions—it was about being willing to hear the answers, no matter how uncomfortable they might be. It was about peeling back the layers of ego, fear, and conditioning to find the truth underneath.

After Thomas left, I sat alone in the quiet of the juice bar, thinking about the journey that had brought me to this point. My time in the Bronx had taught me resilience, but it had also left scars—wounds I had buried so deeply that I hardly recognized them anymore. At Binghamton, I had begun to uncover those scars, to question the narratives I had internalized about myself and the world. And now, at Stoop Juice, I was learning to integrate those lessons, to

build a life that reflected my evolving understanding of who I was.

The next morning, I pulled out my journal and began writing about the concept of self-confrontation. What did it mean, truly, to confront oneself? Was it a one-time act, or a lifelong process? Was it about overcoming fear, or learning to live with it? As I wrote, I found myself returning to the words of philosophers and thinkers who had shaped my journey—Frankl, Dostoevsky, Aurelius. Each of them had wrestled with the same questions in their own way, and each had found meaning in the struggle.

One passage from Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground came to mind: "Man is sometimes extraordinarily, passionately, in love with suffering... Why, then, should I not suffer, since it is my lot, my punishment, as it were, for having been endowed with an abundance of vitality?" These words resonated deeply. They reminded me that suffering wasn't something to be avoided—it was something to be understood, embraced, and transformed.

This insight became a turning point for me. I began to see my own struggles not as obstacles, but as opportunities for growth. The mistakes I had made, the pain I had endured, the blind spots I had ignored—they were all part of the journey. They were the raw materials of self-confrontation, the fuel for transformation.

One evening, as I was closing up the juice bar, I decided to take a walk through the neighborhood. The streets were quiet, the air cool and crisp. As I walked, I thought about the bridges I had built—the connections between the Bronx, Binghamton, and Brooklyn, between

my past and my present, between the person I had been and the person I was becoming.

I found myself staring at a mural on the back of a truck. It depicted a phoenix rising from the ashes, its wings outstretched in defiance of gravity. Beneath it was a quote: "From the fire, we are forged."

The words struck a chord. They captured the essence of what I had been wrestling with—the idea that transformation requires both destruction and creation, that we must let go of the old to make room for the new. Standing there, I felt a sense of clarity and purpose. Self-confrontation wasn't just about facing the fire—it was about emerging from it stronger, wiser, and more whole.

The next day, I decided to share this insight with Jimmy and the other kids at Youth Service. I told them about the mural, about the phoenix, about the fire. "Self-confrontation is like that fire," I said. "It's uncomfortable, even painful, but it's what shapes us. It's what makes us who we are."

Jimmy raised his hand. "But what if you don't like what you see when you look in the mirror?"

His question was raw and honest, and it hit me deeply. "Then you start from there," I said. "You start by accepting what you see, without judgment. And then you decide what you want to change, and you take it one step at a time. It's not about being perfect—it's about being real."

As baseball practice ended, I felt a sense of hope. The kids were beginning to see the power of self-confrontation, the potential it held for transformation. And so was I. For the first time, I understood that this journey wasn't about

reaching a destination—it was about embracing the process, about finding meaning in the struggle.

In the weeks that followed, I continued to explore this idea in my own life. I journaled more frequently, reflecting on the patterns and habits that no longer served me. I had difficult conversations with people I cared about, owning up to my mistakes and seeking to understand theirs. I allowed myself to feel the full range of my emotions, rather than numbing them with distractions or denial.

Through it all, I discovered a sense of freedom I hadn't known was possible. Self-confrontation wasn't about tearing myself apart—it was about putting myself back together, piece by piece. It was about finding the courage to face the fire and the wisdom to rise from its ashes.

As I sat in the quiet of the juice bar one evening, reflecting on this journey, I felt a deep sense of gratitude. The path of self-confrontation was challenging, but it was also beautiful. It was a reminder that we are all works in progress, that our stories are still being written, that our potential is limitless.

And in that moment, I understood something profound: the mirror we fear the most is the one that shows us who we truly are. But it is also the mirror that holds the key to our freedom, our growth, and our transformation. And it is in that mirror that we find the courage to become the people we were always meant to be.

25

As I moved deeper into the process of self-confrontation, I began to notice how much of my life had been shaped by shadows. Shadows of the past, of the people I'd lost, of the places I'd left behind. These shadows were not just memories—they were weights, pulling at me in ways I didn't fully understand. Confronting them required a different kind of courage, a willingness to sit with the darkness and to listen to what it had to teach me.

One evening, as I was cleaning up Stoop Juice after a busy day, Thomas stopped by. He had started coming by more often, sometimes just to talk, sometimes to help me close up. That night, he seemed distracted, his usual energy muted.

"What's on your mind?" I asked as I wiped down the counter.

He hesitated, then said, "I've been thinking about my dad. He left when I was a kid, and I always told myself I didn't care. But lately, I've been wondering... what if I'm like him? What if I mess up the way he did?"

His words hit me deeply. I had asked myself similar questions about my own father, about the legacy of absence and the fear of repeating cycles. "You're not your father, Thomas," I said gently. "But I know what it's like to feel that weight, to wonder if the shadows of the past will

shape your future. The fact that you're asking these questions means you're already breaking the cycle."

He nodded, but his expression remained troubled. "How do you deal with it? The weight of it all?"

I thought about his question long after he left. The truth was, I didn't have a simple answer. The weight of shadows wasn't something you could just shrug off. It lingered, settling into the corners of your mind, influencing your thoughts and actions in ways you didn't always notice. But it was also a teacher, a reminder of where you'd been and how far you'd come.

The next morning, I wrote in my journal: "The weight of shadows is heavy, but it's also grounding. It connects us to our history, to the people and places that have shaped us. Maybe the goal isn't to escape the shadows, but to learn how to carry them with grace."

This idea took on new meaning during a conversation with Ms. Clara. She had been one of the first customers at Stoop Juice, and over the years, we had developed a close friendship. That day, she had brought a photo album with her, filled with pictures from her years as a teacher.

"These kids," she said, pointing to a picture of a group of smiling students, "they carried so much. Poverty, family struggles, systemic barriers. But they also had so much potential. They just needed someone to see it, to believe in them."

Her words reminded me of the corner boys I had grown up with, of Ricky and Javi, of the dreams they had carried alongside their struggles. It also reminded me of the kids at the community center, of Thomas and the questions he was

grappling with. The weight of shadows wasn't just personal—it was collective. It was something we all carried, in different ways, and it was something we could help each other bear.

One evening, as I was locking up the juice bar, I found myself thinking about a study I had read during my time at Binghamton. The study, published in The American Journal of Sociology, examined the concept of "cultural trauma"—the idea that communities, like individuals, can carry the weight of collective pain. The researchers argued that acknowledging and addressing this trauma was essential for healing, both individually and collectively.

The idea resonated deeply. The Bronx was a community shaped by cultural trauma, its history marked by systemic neglect, economic hardship, and social dislocation. But it was also a community of resilience, of creativity, of unyielding spirit. The weight of its shadows was heavy, but it was also a testament to its strength.

I began to think about how this concept applied to my own life. The shadows I carried weren't just mine—they were part of a larger tapestry, woven from the experiences of my family, my community, my culture. Confronting them wasn't just about personal growth; it was about honoring the people and places that had shaped me, about finding a way to transform their weight into something meaningful.

This realization became a turning point for me. I started to see the shadows not as burdens, but as guides. They were reminders of where I came from, of the lessons I had learned, of the strength I had inherited. They were also

reminders of my responsibility—to myself, to my community, to the next generation.

One afternoon, during baseball practice, I decided to share this insight with the kids. We were talking about resilience, about how to navigate the challenges life throws our way. I told them about the shadows I carried, about how I had learned to sit with them, to listen to what they had to say.

"Your shadows don't define you," I said. "But they are a part of you. They carry lessons, wisdom, strength. The key is to learn from them, to let them guide you without letting them control you."

Thomas raised his hand. "But what if the shadows feel too heavy? What if they're too much?"

I looked at him, seeing the weight he was carrying, the questions he was struggling to answer. "Then you lean on the people around you," I said. "You share the weight. You let them remind you that you're not alone."

The room was quiet, the kids absorbing the words, the truth of them settling into the space. In that moment, I saw the power of community, of connection, of collective resilience. The weight of shadows wasn't something we had to carry alone. It was something we could share, something we could transform together.

As I walked home that evening from parade Grounds, I thought about the bridges I had built—the connections between the Bronx, Binghamton, and Brooklyn, between my past and my present, between the people who had shaped me and the people I was now helping to shape. The weight of shadows was still there, but it felt lighter,

more manageable. It felt like a part of the journey, rather than an obstacle to it.

That night, I wrote in my journal: "The weight of shadows is not a burden to be avoided, but a truth to be embraced. It is a reminder of where we've been, of what we've endured, of who we are. And it is a call to action—a call to build bridges, to create spaces for healing, to transform the weight into something meaningful."

The next day, I shared this reflection with Ms. Clara. She listened thoughtfully, her expression a mix of curiosity and understanding. "You know," she said, "shadows are only possible because of light. Maybe the weight of the shadows is just a reminder of the light we carry within us."

Her words stayed with me, a quiet echo in the back of my mind. The weight of shadows wasn't just about the darkness—it was also about the light. It was about the resilience, the hope, the courage that allowed us to keep moving forward, even when the path was unclear.

As I continued to navigate the journey of self-confrontation, I found myself returning to this idea again and again. The weight of shadows was heavy, but it was also grounding. It connected me to my history, to my community, to the larger story of humanity. And in that connection, I found a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, a sense of hope.

The shadows were still there, but they no longer felt like weights pulling me down. They felt like roots, anchoring me to the soil of my experiences, giving me the strength to rise. And in that rising, I found the courage to keep moving

forward, to keep building bridges, to keep believing in the power of light.

26

As I reflected on the journey that had brought me to this point, I realized that the weight of shadows had not just been something to endure—it had been something to illuminate. The darkness of the past had taught me resilience, the importance of community, and the power of self-confrontation. But it was the light beyond the shadows that revealed the full picture, the hope that made the struggle worthwhile.

One morning at Stoop Juice, Ms. Clara sat by the window with her usual stack of books. She glanced up from her reading and said, "You know, it's funny how we always think the shadows are the end of the story. But they're just a beginning, aren't they?"

Her words echoed a truth I had been grappling with: the shadows we carry are part of us, but they don't define us. They point to the presence of light, the source of strength that lies beyond them. This realization was the culmination of everything I had learned—not just at the juice bar, but throughout my life.

The conversations I had with customers and community members became a mirror for my own reflections. One evening, Thomas came in after school. His usual energy was replaced by a quiet determination. "I've been thinking about what you said," he began, sitting down at the

counter. “About carrying the weight and sharing it. I talked to my mom about my dad. It was hard, but it felt... freeing. Like I didn’t have to hold it all by myself anymore.”

His words struck a chord. Sharing the weight didn’t make it disappear, but it transformed it. It turned a burden into a bridge, a source of connection and healing. Thomas’s bravery reminded me of the importance of relationships in navigating life’s complexities.

At Stoop Juice, these relationships were the foundation of everything. Reggie, who had decided to go back to school, stopped by one afternoon with a smile on his face. “Got my first A,” he announced, holding up his paper. The pride in his voice was contagious, a reminder of what was possible when we dared to step into the light.

The juice bar had become a microcosm of the world I wanted to help create—a place where people could come together, share their stories, and find strength in each other. But it wasn’t just about the juice bar. It was about the lessons I had learned along the way and how I could carry them forward.

One evening, after closing up, I found myself thinking about a question Jimmy had asked during one of our baseball practices. “How do you know when you’ve made it?” he had asked, his tone both curious and skeptical.

At the time, I hadn’t known how to answer. But now, sitting alone in the quiet of the juice bar, I realized that “making it” wasn’t about reaching a destination. It was about the journey, about the small victories and the lessons learned along the way. It was about the connections we

build, the light we bring into the world, and the courage to keep moving forward, even when the path is unclear.

I thought about the kids at Youth Service, about Ms. Clara and Reggie, about the customers who came through Stoop Juice every day. Each of them carried their own shadows, their own struggles and hopes. And yet, in their stories, I saw the same light that had guided me—the light of resilience, of connection, of possibility.

As I wrote in my journal that night, I found myself reflecting on a quote by Viktor Frankl: "What is to give light must endure burning." It was a reminder that the journey wasn't meant to be easy. The challenges, the struggles, the shadows—they were all part of the process. They were what made the light possible.

The next morning, I decided to share this insight with the kids at practice. We sat in a circle, their faces filled with a mix of curiosity and skepticism. "What does it mean to you," I asked, "to give light? What does your light look like?"

The answers were varied and heartfelt. Jimmy talked about his dream of becoming a graphic designer, about using his creativity to inspire others. Tasha spoke about wanting to be a nurse, about the joy of helping people heal. Even the quieter kids found their voices, sharing dreams and hopes that were as unique as they were.

As they spoke, I saw the light in each of them—the potential, the courage, the resilience. It was a reminder that the light beyond the shadows wasn't something distant or unattainable. It was already there, waiting to be recognized and nurtured.

That evening, I walked through Prospect Park and Park Slope, reflecting on the bridges I had built and the lessons I had learned. The Bronx, Binghamton, Brooklyn—each had shaped me in its own way, teaching me resilience, curiosity, and connection. The journey hadn't been linear, and it hadn't been easy. But it had been worth it.

I thought about the juice bar and the community it had fostered, about the people who had come through its doors and the stories they had shared. Each of them had added a thread to the tapestry of my life, a reminder of the power of connection and the importance of holding space for others.

As I returned to Stoop Juice, I ran into the same truck with the mural of the phoenix. The words beneath it—"From the fire, we are forged"—felt more resonant than ever. The fire was the shadows, the struggles, the challenges. But the light was what came after—the strength, the wisdom, the resilience.

That night, I wrote in my journal: "The light beyond the shadows isn't something we find. It's something we create. It's the choices we make, the connections we build, the courage we summon. It's the legacy we leave, not in grand gestures, but in the small, everyday acts of love and kindness that ripple outward."

As I closed my journal, I felt a sense of peace. The journey wasn't over—there were still challenges to face, bridges to build, lessons to learn. But for the first time, I felt fully present in the process, fully alive in the light beyond the shadows.

The next day, I shared this reflection with Jimmy. He listened intently, his expression thoughtful. “So it’s not about escaping the shadows,” he said. “It’s about learning to live with them. To find the light in them.”

“Exactly,” I said. “The shadows are part of the story, but they’re not the whole story. The light is what gives them meaning. And the light is what we carry forward.”

As I watched Jimmy walk away, his step lighter than before, I felt a deep sense of gratitude. The light beyond the shadows wasn’t just about me—it was about all of us. It was about the connections we build, the hope we nurture, the courage we find in each other. And it was a reminder that even in the darkest moments, the light is always there, waiting to be seen.

27

Life is not a straight line; it is a series of overlapping circles. Each circle brings us back to where we started but with a deeper understanding of who we are. As I sat in Stoop Juice one quiet evening, reflecting on my journey, I realized that every challenge, every victory, every shadow, and every light had brought me to this moment. And in this moment, I saw the power of embracing insignificance, of framing life through constructive self-confrontation, and of rejecting the fallacy of a just world.

The idea of insignificance might sound bleak at first, but for me, it has been liberating. To accept that I am one small part of a vast, interconnected universe is to release the weight of trying to control everything. It is to embrace what philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described as the "infinite resignation," the ability to let go of the illusions of certainty and find peace in the unknown. Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward." His words resonate deeply with me, as they remind me that the journey is not about knowing where we will end up but about walking the path with an open heart and mind.

I thought back to my younger self, the boy growing up on Townsend Avenue, surrounded by the chaos of the Bronx in the late 1970s. Back then, the world felt

overwhelming, unjust, and unkind. The abandoned buildings, the heroin trade, the transactional relationships—they were all part of a reality I couldn't escape. But even in those moments, there were seeds of hope. My mother's resilience, my curiosity sparked by that discarded encyclopedia, and the mentors I met along the way all pointed to a light beyond the shadows.

Meeting David Durk at that writer's workshop was one of those pivotal moments. Durk, with his Amherst education and his unyielding commitment to justice, showed me that even within flawed systems, individuals could make a difference. He reminded me of what Albert Camus wrote in The Myth of Sisyphus: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." Durk's life was a testament to this idea, and his mentorship became a cornerstone of my own journey toward purpose.

Then there was Piri Thomas. Meeting him at Binghamton University was like finding a mirror that reflected both my struggles and my potential. His words, both in his writing and in person, carried the weight of experience and the clarity of someone who had confronted his own shadows. In Down These Mean Streets, he wrote, "I wanted to run away, but I couldn't run from myself." That line stayed with me, a reminder that self-confrontation is not optional—it is necessary. Piri's honesty gave me the courage to face my own truths, even when they were uncomfortable.

As I pieced together the lessons from my past, I saw how they had shaped my present. The juice bar, coaching

baseball, the conversations with Jimmy, Thomas, Ms. Clara, and Reggie—each was a circle of reflection, bringing me closer to the core of who I was. The kids at Youth Service, in particular, reminded me of my younger self. Their questions, their doubts, their hopes—they were echoes of my own, and in guiding them, I found guidance for myself.

One of the most profound lessons I've learned is that setbacks and obstacles are not detours; they are the path. Nietzsche captured this truth when he wrote, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." My why has evolved over the years, but at its core, it has always been about connection—to myself, to others, and to the larger world. It is a why rooted in love, not as a fleeting emotion but as a commitment to seeing and honoring the humanity in others.

This commitment has been tested time and again. Running Stoop Juice has not been without its challenges. There were days when I questioned whether it was worth it, when I felt the weight of responsibility pressing down on me. But each time, I returned to the why. I thought about the bridges I was building—between the Bronx and Brooklyn, between the past and the present, between shadows and light.

One evening, as I was journaling, I found myself reflecting on a passage from Fyodor Dostoevsky's The Idiot. He wrote, "Beauty will save the world." For years, I struggled to understand what he meant. How could beauty save anything in a world so full of suffering? But now, I see that beauty is not about perfection—it is about truth. It is about the raw, unfiltered moments of humanity that

connect us to each other. It is the beauty of Thomas and Jimmy's questions, of Reggie's resilience, of Ms. Clara's wisdom. It is the beauty of embracing our flaws and finding strength in our vulnerability.

The fallacy of a just world is perhaps the greatest obstacle to this kind of understanding. Growing up, I often felt the sting of injustice, the sense that life was unfair. It wasn't until I began studying philosophy that I realized the problem wasn't the lack of justice—it was the expectation of it. Arthur Schopenhauer, with his often bleak worldview, wrote, "The world is my idea." His words challenged me to see the world not as it should be, but as it is. And in doing so, I found a strange kind of freedom. If the world is not just, then it is up to us to create moments of justice, to bring light to the shadows in whatever ways we can.

As I near the end of this chapter of my life, I find myself returning to the question that has guided me from the beginning: What does it mean to live a good life? For me, the answer lies in the intersections—between hope and despair, between individual and community, between shadow and light. It lies in the courage to ask hard questions and the humility to accept that the answers may never come. It lies in the willingness to embrace insignificance, not as a defeat but as an invitation to focus on what truly matters.

On the cover of my laptop, there is a quote that has become something of a mantra for me: "Be the light you wish to see in the world." It is a simple idea, but it holds profound truth. Each of us has the power to bring light into the lives of others, to build bridges, to create spaces for

connection and growth. And in doing so, we find our own light, our own purpose.

As I write these words, I am reminded of something Boethius wrote in The Consolation of Philosophy: "In every adversity, fortune leaves open a door to deliverance by endurance." These words are a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, to the power of hope and perseverance. They remind me that the journey is not about reaching a destination but about walking the path with integrity, curiosity, and love.

The circles of reflection continue to expand, each one bringing me closer to the light beyond the shadows. And as I step into the next chapter of my life, I carry with me the lessons of the past, the connections of the present, and the hope of the future. Because in the end, it is not the destination that defines us—it is the journey, the choices we make, and the light we bring into the world.

28

Every journey, no matter how deliberate, encounters moments of disorientation. There are times when the path forward becomes obscured, when progress feels like a distant memory, and when doubts threaten to undo the foundations you've worked so hard to build. I have learned that it is in these moments that we most need a compass—a guiding principle or a simple truth to reorient ourselves and continue the work of becoming.

For me, this compass has been shaped by a collection of truths I've gathered over the years, from the stoops of the Bronx to the quiet evenings at Stoop Juice. These truths are not fixed; they evolve as I do. But they share a common thread: they remind me to keep my heart and mind open, to embrace insignificance, and to frame life through constructive self-confrontation, even in the face of setbacks and the fallacy of a just world.

One of these truths is the idea that life is not about controlling outcomes but about controlling our response to them. This insight came to me through the words of Marcus Aurelius, who wrote in Meditations: "You have power over your mind—not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength." These words have been my anchor in moments of chaos, a reminder that while I cannot dictate

what happens to me, I can choose how I interpret and respond to it.

This lesson was tested one evening at Stoop Juice. It had been a particularly challenging day—deliveries were delayed, a key employee called out, and a dissatisfied customer had left a scathing review online. As I sat at the counter, feeling the weight of it all, Reggie stopped by. He noticed my frustration and said, "Bad days don't last forever, Mr. Franco. You always tell us that."

His words pulled me out of my spiral. He was right. I had often shared that wisdom with others, but I needed to hear it for myself. The compass of resilience pointed me back to the core truth: setbacks are temporary, and they are opportunities to grow stronger. I took a deep breath, wrote down the lessons I could learn from the day's challenges, and resolved to move forward.

Another truth that has guided me is the recognition of insignificance as a source of liberation rather than despair. In a world that often equates worth with power or success, accepting one's smallness can feel counterintuitive. But as I've come to understand, insignificance frees us from the illusion of control and allows us to focus on what truly matters: the connections we build, the kindness we offer, and the meaning we create.

This understanding was deepened during a conversation with Ms. Clara. She had been reflecting on her years as a teacher, the countless students she had taught, and the impact she had made. "Sometimes I wonder if it was enough," she said. "If all those years added up to anything meaningful."

I thought about her question and shared a quote from Viktor Frankl: "The meaning of life is to give life meaning." I told her that the ripple effects of her work—her patience, her encouragement, her belief in her students—could never be fully measured. They were part of a larger tapestry, one that she might never see in its entirety but that was undeniably beautiful.

In my own life, I have found that framing setbacks through constructive self-confrontation is another essential truth. This is not about self-criticism or dwelling on failure; it is about asking the hard questions and being willing to face uncomfortable answers. Am I living in alignment with my values? Have I allowed fear or ego to dictate my choices? What can I learn from this moment to grow stronger?

During my weight loss journey, these questions became my constant companions. Each day, I confronted the habits and beliefs that had held me back. I asked myself why I had allowed external circumstances to dictate my actions and what it would take to reclaim control. The process was not easy, but it was transformative. And it taught me that self-confrontation is not a one-time act—it is a lifelong practice.

This practice has been particularly valuable in challenging the fallacy of a just world. Growing up, I often struggled with the belief that life should be fair, that hard work and good intentions would inevitably lead to success. But experience, and the writings of thinkers like Schopenhauer and Camus, have taught me otherwise. Life is not just. It is complex, unpredictable, and often indifferent to our desires.

Yet, within this understanding lies a profound freedom. If the world is not just, then we are not bound by its expectations. We can create our own meaning, our own justice, through our actions and choices. This is what Camus meant when he wrote, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." It is the act of striving, not the outcome, that gives life its richness.

This truth has shaped how I approach the challenges of running Stoop Juice, of mentoring the kids at Youth Service, and of navigating my own journey of self-discovery. It reminds me to focus on the process, to find joy in the effort, and to let go of the need for perfect outcomes.

As I reflect on these truths, I am reminded of a conversation I had with Jimmy not long ago. He had been struggling with a math problem, growing increasingly frustrated with each attempt. “What’s the point?” he exclaimed, tossing his pencil aside. “I’ll never get it right.”

I sat down beside him and said, “The point isn’t to get it right on the first try. The point is to keep trying, to learn from each attempt, and to get a little better each time. That’s how progress works—not in leaps, but in steps.”

His frustration softened, and he picked up the pencil again. Watching him work through the problem, I saw a reflection of my own journey—the small steps, the setbacks, the persistence that leads to growth. Jimmy’s determination reminded me that the compass of self-confrontation is not about reaching a destination; it is about staying on the path, no matter how winding it may be.

In the quiet moments, when doubts creep in and the weight of shadows feels heavy, I return to these truths. They are my compass, guiding me back to the core of who I am and what I believe. They remind me to keep my heart and mind open, to embrace the complexity of life, and to find light even in the darkest moments.

As I prepare to step into the next chapter of my life, I carry these truths with me. They are not just lessons—they are tools, reminders, and sources of strength. They are the light beyond the shadows, the fire that forges resilience, and the foundation of a life lived with purpose and meaning.

The journey continues, and so does the work of becoming. And in that work, I find not just a sense of direction, but a sense of peace—a reminder that even in the moments of disorientation, the compass is always there, waiting to guide me home.

29

As the circles of my life expanded, bringing new insights and deeper connections, one truth became increasingly clear: certainty is an illusion. For so long, I had chased it, believing that with enough knowledge, effort, and resilience, I could anchor myself in a world that often felt chaotic and unpredictable. But the more I lived, the more I realized that certainty was not only unattainable—it was unnecessary. The real work lay in learning to embrace the ambiguity and to find meaning in the questions themselves.

This lesson was brought into sharp focus one evening at Stoop Juice. Ms. Clara had stopped by, as she often did, carrying a book that seemed to mirror her thoughts. "Have you ever read anything by Simone de Beauvoir?" she asked, settling into her usual spot by the window. When I admitted that I hadn't, she opened her book to a passage and read aloud: "The present is neither what it was nor what it will be. It is something that is continually being made and unmade."

Her words lingered long after she left, resonating with my own experiences of change and uncertainty. The present, as de Beauvoir suggested, is fluid and elusive, a space where the past and future meet but never fully

resolve. It is in this in-between space that life unfolds, messy and unpredictable, yet rich with possibility.

I thought about the many moments in my life when I had clung to the illusion of certainty. As a boy growing up on Townsend Avenue, I had believed that escaping the Bronx would guarantee a better future. At Binghamton, I had convinced myself that education alone would unlock the answers I sought. Even at Stoop Juice, I had fallen into the trap of thinking that success could be measured by stability or external validation.

But life had a way of dismantling these illusions. Each setback, each unexpected twist, forced me to confront the reality that certainty was never the goal. The goal was to remain open, to adapt, and to find meaning in the journey itself. This realization was both humbling and freeing. It allowed me to shift my focus from controlling outcomes to engaging fully with the process, to see each moment as an opportunity for growth rather than a test of worth.

One of the most profound examples of this came during a conversation with Thomas. He had been working on a group project at school and was frustrated by the lack of cooperation from his peers. "I don't get it," he said, his voice tinged with both anger and confusion. "I planned everything out. I did my part. Why can't they just follow through?"

I smiled, recognizing myself in his frustration. "It's hard when things don't go the way you expect," I said. "But maybe the point isn't to make everything go according to plan. Maybe the point is to learn how to adapt when it doesn't."

He looked at me skeptically. "So I'm just supposed to let people mess things up?"

"Not at all," I replied. "But you can't control what other people do. What you can control is how you respond. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is step back, reassess, and find a new way forward."

Thomas nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. "So it's not about being perfect. It's about being flexible."

"Exactly," I said. "Certainty is a myth. The real strength lies in being able to navigate the uncertainty."

This idea became a touchstone for me, a reminder that life's unpredictability is not a flaw but a feature. It is in the uncertainty that we find creativity, resilience, and the possibility of transformation. It is in the ambiguity that we discover who we truly are.

The philosophers who had shaped my thinking echoed this sentiment. Nietzsche wrote, "You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star." His words reminded me that creativity and growth often emerge from the very disorder we seek to avoid. Camus, too, embraced the absurdity of existence, finding freedom in the acknowledgment that life's lack of inherent meaning was an invitation to create our own.

These ideas were not just intellectual exercises; they were tools for navigating the challenges of daily life. When deliveries were delayed, when plans fell through, when the path ahead seemed uncertain, I returned to these truths. I reminded myself that the goal was not to eliminate the chaos but to dance with it, to find grace and purpose in the midst of the unpredictability.

One evening, as I walked through the neighborhood, I thought about the bridges I had built—between the Bronx and Brooklyn, between my past and my present, between the person I had been and the person I was becoming. Each bridge had been constructed not with certainty but with faith, with the willingness to take a step even when the destination was unclear.

I walked by the truck with the painted mural of the phoenix once again. Its wings stretched upward, defying gravity, a testament to the power of transformation. Beneath it, the words "From the fire, we are forged" took on new meaning. The fire was the uncertainty, the chaos, the setbacks. And the forging was the process of navigating it all, of finding strength and beauty in the struggle.

As I returned to Stoop Juice, I thought about the conversations I had had with Reggie, Ms. Clara, Thomas, and so many others. Each of them had faced their own uncertainties, their own moments of doubt and disorientation. And yet, in each of them, I saw the same resilience, the same capacity for growth and connection.

That night, I wrote in my journal: "Certainty is not the goal. It is the illusion we must release to find freedom. The real work is in embracing the uncertainty, in finding meaning and beauty in the chaos, in stepping into the unknown with courage and grace."

The next day, I shared this reflection with the 15u baseball players at practice. We talked about the fallacy of certainty and the power of adaptability. the kids, as always, had questions. "So if we can't be certain about anything, how do we know what to trust?"

I thought about his question and said, "You trust the process. You trust your ability to learn, to grow, and to adapt. And you trust the people who walk the journey with you, even if they stumble along the way."

Their skepticism softened into a thoughtful nod. "So it's about trust, not control."

"Exactly," I said. "And in that trust, you'll find a kind of certainty—not in the outcomes, but in yourself."

As I watched the kids on the team leave that day, I felt a sense of peace. The fallacy of certainty no longer felt like a limitation—it felt like an invitation. An invitation to embrace life's complexity, to dance with the chaos, and to find joy in the journey. And in that dance, I found a lightness I hadn't known was possible—a lightness that carried me forward, one uncertain step at a time.

30

The closure of Stoop Juice in January 2020 felt, at first, like an ending. The pandemic had brought the world to its knees, dismantling the routines and spaces we had come to rely on. For me, it was not just the loss of a business but the closing of a chapter that had defined so much of my identity. Stoop Juice had been more than a juice bar; it was a space for connection, reflection, and growth. Without it, I was left to grapple with a question that had haunted me for much of my life: Who am I when everything I've built falls away?

As I stood behind the counter in the final days of Stoop Juice, I asked myself: "If I am no longer a business owner, what remains of me?" The answer didn't come quickly or easily. In the months following the closure, I found myself drawn to the same practices that had sustained me through earlier challenges: silence, listening, and journaling. These were not just acts of retreat but of recalibration, a way to find clarity amid the noise of uncertainty.

"When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what the storm is all about." This reflection by Haruki Murakami brought me back to the

stoops of the Bronx, where storms were not metaphors but real, relentless tests of survival. At that time, I would ask myself, "What will tomorrow bring, and am I ready for it?" It was there, amid the shadows of systemic neglect and the indomitable spirit of those around me, that I learned the essence of transformation. Each struggle was not an ending but a beginning, a chance to redefine myself and grow stronger, much like the day I stumbled upon that encyclopedia in the garbage. That simple act of curiosity—turning page after page of the picture encyclopedia—sparked a lifelong quest for understanding.

During my time at Binghamton University, as I juggled classes and part-time jobs, I found myself questioning: "Am I on the right path, or is this just survival disguised as progress?" This duality shaped my understanding of becoming as both an individual and collective act—a process influenced by choices, people, and environments. As Dostoevsky once observed, "Man only likes to count his troubles; he doesn't calculate his happiness." For me, this insight became a foundational truth: joy is not found in static achievements but in the act of striving, the relentless pursuit of understanding and growth.

My life has been blessed with teachers—not only those who guided me in formal settings but those who shaped my worldview in unexpected ways. I recall the profound impact of David Durk, whose workshop opened my eyes to systemic injustice and resilience. His words, "You fight the

part of yourself that wants to give up," became a mantra during my toughest moments. Piri Thomas, with his raw honesty, handed me a compass to navigate the labyrinth of identity and purpose. "The streets are a teacher," he said, "but they're not the only teacher." At Binghamton, I would often ask myself, "If knowledge is power, why do I feel powerless?" These lessons became lifelines, shaping my perspective and grounding my journey.

As a coach, I learned as much from my players as they did from me. Players like Harrison Bader, Pedro Beato, Adam Ottavino, and Jose Cuas embodied what it means to merge singular focus, work ethic, and belief. Their journeys to the Major Leagues stand as testaments to what is possible when talent meets discipline. I often wondered, "What separates those who succeed from those who fall short?"

Then there were those who did not make it to the highest levels of baseball but achieved profound success elsewhere. Eudis Batista, for instance, lacked elite athleticism but possessed an unmatched work ethic. Today, he thrives as an entrepreneur in the food service industry, owning multiple locations in Brooklyn and Queens. His story reminds me of William James' insight: "The greatest use of a life is to spend it on something that will outlast it." Eudis' journey prompted me to ask, "How do we measure success beyond accolades?"

From the chapter "Real," I reflect on how the everyday resilience of those in the Bronx inspired me. The kids who stayed out of trouble, not because it was easy, but because they wanted something better for themselves, taught me lessons about quiet strength and unspoken courage. At Stoop Juice, I often asked myself, "What lessons am I teaching by how I live my life?"

Not all lessons were uplifting. From the stoops of the Bronx to the philosophy classes at Binghamton University, I've witnessed how systems constrain potential while simultaneously marveling at how individuals overcome those constraints. The corner boys, who survived by navigating the labyrinth of systemic neglect, taught me about resilience—but also about the cost of survival. Javi's words still linger: "You hustle, you make it work. Ain't nobody coming to save us."

It was this mix of agency and structural limitation that I encountered when coaching. Some players, like Eudis and Jose Cuas, channeled adversity into fuel, while others, through no lack of effort, fell short of their dreams. This dichotomy taught me the weight of responsibility—as a coach, as a mentor, and as a participant in larger societal systems. It is a weight that, once acknowledged, can't be ignored. I often reflected, "Am I doing enough to help others find their way?"

From the chapter "Randy," I draw on the profound friendship and shared vulnerability that Randy's story offered me. His life, marked by moments of joy and pain, became a mirror in which I saw my own struggles reflected. Randy's authenticity reminded me that even in the darkest times, connections with others can be a lifeline. In his memory, I often ask myself, "Am I living a life that honors those who believed in me?"

While I've learned from countless individuals, none have shaped me more than my immediate family. Their privacy and quiet strength serve as a counterbalance to my public introspections. My mother's journey from a seamstress in Manhattan's garment district to a matriarch who never let circumstances dim her spirit is a testament to enduring resilience. I still remember her mantra, "El que no trabaja, no come," a phrase that carried us through the toughest times and instilled in me a deep respect for hard work and perseverance. My father, through his absence, unintentionally taught me the power of quiet integrity—a lesson I didn't fully appreciate until much later in life. As Dostoevsky wrote, "What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." In my mother, I saw the opposite: a capacity for love that withstood every storm. In their example, I often ask, "Am I carrying forward their values in a way that would make them proud?"

At the heart of becoming lies the courage to confront oneself. For me, this confrontation has often been inspired by philosophy. Reading Dostoevsky, Proust, and William James taught me that becoming is not a destination but an ongoing dialogue with oneself and the world. James' notion that "truth is what works" underscores the pragmatism required in this journey, while Proust's meditations on memory remind us that the past is not a weight but a resource. Behind the counter at Stoop Juice, I frequently asked, "Am I staying true to my principles, even when no one is watching?"

To embrace becoming is to embrace paradox. It is to see the shadows as part of the light, to recognize that the journey is never linear. When Stoop Juice closed its doors, it felt like the end of an era—a space where countless conversations, reflections, and quiet epiphanies took place. Yet, as one chapter closed, another began, reminding me that life often refuses to provide clarity when we most crave it. The closure of the juice bar mirrored this uncertainty, compelling me to lean into the discomfort of not knowing and to trust in the value of persistence and reflection. It was a reminder that the act of becoming is ongoing, driven not by certainty but by the courage to continue despite ambiguity. My own story, from losing 70 pounds to transitioning careers, is evidence that transformation is neither easy nor complete. The embrace of becoming is the willingness to acknowledge one's own blind spots—to accept, as Dostoevsky might suggest, that the more we learn, the less we truly know.

In this chapter and throughout this book, I aim to create something akin to the encyclopedia I found as a child—a resource for navigating the complexities of life with curiosity and courage. In a world inundated with an endless stream of information, much of it disposable, I hope this project serves as a beacon, especially for the kids living in today's version of The Bronx in the 70's and 80's, offering them not just knowledge but a framework to keep their hearts and minds open.

This book, like my life, is a mosaic of voices and lessons, a testament to the enduring power of growth. It is my hope that in reading it, you too might find the courage to confront your own becoming, to see it not as a burden but as an invitation to create, to connect, and to continue. For in the end, as William James reminds us, "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook."